

**A STUDY ON THE SOCIO POLITICAL
CONDITION OF WOMEN IN THE MUGHAL
HAREM (1526-1707)**

A Thesis

Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY



Dr. Mahesh Chandra Dubey
Supervisor

Dr. Pradeep Kumar
Co-Supervisor

Sugandha Rawat
Research Scholar
MUR1303782

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCE & FINE ARTS
MEWAR UNIVERSITY, GANGRAR, CHITTORGARH (RAJ.)

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This is to certify that I, Sugandha Rawat have completed the Ph.D. thesis work on the topic **A STUDY ON THE SOCIO POLITICAL CONDITION OF WOMEN IN THE MUGHAL HAREM (1526-1707)** under the supervision of Dr Mahesh Chandra Dubey (Supervisor) & Dr. Pradeep Kumar (Co-Supervisor) for the partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Mewar University, Gangrar, Chittorgarh, Rajasthan. This is an original piece of work & I have not submitted it earlier elsewhere.

Date:

Sugandha Rawat

MUR1303782

Place:

DECLARATION BY THE CANDIDATE

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Sugandha Rawat

MUR1303782

Place:

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Supervisor

Dr. Pradeep Kumar
Co-Supervisor

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Sugandha Rawat

ABSTRACT

My rudimentary understanding of the Mughal harem developed during the writing of my dissertation work, based on one of the most discussed Mughal ladies - Nurjahan. However it was during the course of last few years that my knowledge of harem has taken a concrete form. It won't be an exaggeration to say that I have lived and breathed this topic so much so that it has become an integral part of my existence. It so happened many times while walking through the alleys and *Baradaris* that I could feel the times gone by. Standing at the *Jharokhas* I could somewhat sense how the harem females would have seen the outside world. Many questions besieged my mind at the onset of this work. The most intriguing was regarding the true character of the harem ? Whether it was a pleasure garden meant for the gratification of the King or it was a full-fledged institution that empowered its residents in a unique way.

The reason for this confusion arises primarily owing to two reasons: one is the dearth of material on the subject and two is the extreme contradiction in the portrayal of harem in foreign traveler accounts and those of indigenous writers. It is no secret that the foreign travelers suffered from many limitations like their ignorance of our culture, language, and religion. Hence they could not appreciate the fine nuances of our culture and tradition. At the same time all foreign writers were male and hence were not allowed to enter the haremsara. Thus their primary source of information was the bazaar gossip and the female slaves working in the zenana. Therefore whatever the foreign travelers have accounted for is not eye witness account but concoction of fact and fable. While on the other hand the indigenous writers were mostly court chroniclers. Hence not in a position to report the facts that would put their patrons in a bad light. This puts up a big challenge as sources of information have to be carefully examined to decipher the truth. Thus we find extreme contradiction in the versions-while the foreign traveler accounts paint harem as a pleasure sanctuary meant for the sexual gratification of the Emperor where women were nothing more than showpieces, the other projects the conduct of the King as blameless and the female residents as happy and content in their space. This obviously leads to arousal of curiosity. Therefore during the course of my writing I have attempted to decode the true nature of the imperial seraglio.

The mystery and romance surrounding the domestic life of the Mughals has always fascinated me. A lot has been written about the political, socio-economic and religious

policies of the Mughals however their personal life remains more or less shrouded in obscurity. The native chroniclers have either remained tight lipped about the topic or they have passed very casual references. Therefore it becomes very difficult to know about the true character of the imperial household. Modern Indian writers too have not written extensively upon the topic. In fact it is strange to note that few good works upon the topic have come from foreign authors. It is also worth mentioning that not many women have chosen to explore this topic. It is also worth mentioning that women and their doings generally don't form part of Mughal historical accounts, In fact from the time of Akbar there developed the tradition of referring to women by titles allotted to them and not their real names. Perhaps this was owing to Akbar's puritanical attitude and influence of his Rajput realations. However we do have women like Nurjahan and Jahanara exerting tremendous power and influence from behind the veil, but that is more of exception thane general rule.

It would be wrong to say that women were not happy and denied a healthy life, however they were allowed to play a very limited role in the Mughal policy. They were hailed as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters. Nevertheless, they surely did not have a direct role to play in politics. For in the entire span of Mughal history the closest that came to the throne was Nurjahan and she too could become de facto ruler only, under the patronage of her husband. We can better understand this dichotomy of the Mughal world by looking at the beautiful edifice of the Taj Mahal, that stands tall as the memory of a husband's love for his wife. No Taj Mahal was built to secure the memory of Nurjahan who came very close to wielding power, it was rather built for Arjumand Banu Begum, who was more content to be a wife and mother.

Harem referred to a forbidden place i.e. enclosed quarters meant for the residence of the female members of the family, which were forbidden to other men. However it is important to note that the term women of the family denoted all the female relatives - mothers, aunts, sisters, wives, daughters, concubines, female servants etc. of the Emperor or the master of the household. The harem served the basic purpose of providing safe and structured residence to the female relatives of the King. Strict rules of purdah and seclusion was observed, highest order of security was adopted to ensure safety and well being of the harem inmates. It won't be wrong to say that Zenana was an all women's world with its own power structure. Although contradictory to the general belief all the women residents of zenana were not meant for a sexual purpose.

The harem was in fact home to the Emperor's most revered and cherished female relations like mothers, aunts, daughters, daughters-in-law also. Hence it would be erroneous to presume that the harem was the center of lasciviousness and moral degradation. Sexual activity must have formed an inseparable part of it but it was not the end of it.

In today's time when the feminist studies have taken center stage, it is relevant to study about the condition of women during medieval times. As women from different religions, regions, nationalities, linguistic and cultural backgrounds lived together in the imperial household. It worked more as the microcosm of the medieval society. Hence we can get a better understanding about our past and preserve its memory by undertaking a study of it. As per the general perception the medieval age was not the best time for women owing to the discrimination and bigotry. However a closer look into those times reveal that not all was dark and doomed. In fact during the course of present work I found that many talented women excelled in various fields of activity. They were engaged in trade, involved in the construction of beautiful buildings, wrote poetry, solicited advice to their sons, brothers, and husbands. Therefore royal women appear as talented, confident, and emancipated. At the same time we cannot lose sight of the fact that they must have faced the challenges of a polygamous household. We know that medieval age was about wars and women were treated like war booty, this must have made them vulnerable. It won't be wrong to say that the real power of a woman came from her husband's support and the moment a lady widowed or lost affection of her master her power ceased. Thus we see that. Women were free to do whatever they wanted to do within the confines of harem. However they had no role in power sharing.

A detailed study of the Mughal Harem (1526-1707 A.D.) makes it clear that the Mughal zenana was an independent institution and to dismiss it and to limit it as a pleasure sanctuary would be wrong. The complex nature of the seraglio owing to the presence of a variety of females coming from different backgrounds must have created problems and posed unique challenges leading to feelings like insecurity, jealousy, and rivalry among women. However we should not forget that polygamy was an accepted medieval practice. Hence it would be wrong to ostracize the Mughals for the stature of a King was measured by the size of his harem. The bigger the harem, mightier the monarch. Many Mughal ladies have secured a place for themselves in the pages of history.

Qutlugh Nigar Khanum, Gulbadan Begum, Hamida Banu Begum, Ruqaiyya Begum, Nurjahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahanara, Roshanara, Zebunnisa are few names who exerted tremendous influence in their time. However it is also true that these were just a handful of women in the long span of the Mughal dynasty in India. Out of many only a handful could get such glory. Productive role of women was undeniably supreme as it was essential to secure the continuity of the Mughal line. Motherhood elevated a woman's position but there were cases of childless women gaining great power owing to their talent. For example Ruqaiyya Sultan Begum and Nurjahan could not bear children to their husbands. However they gained ascendancy over their husbands. The luxurious harem life was decidedly short of love. As the master's unreserved love was a luxury that not many could lay claim on. For most women the biggest satisfaction was to be part of the Mughal household. It is also worth mentioning that Akbar started the practice of marrying Hindu Rajput women and this led to introduction of Rajput culture and tradition in the Mughal household that gave birth to a hybrid culture that had both Persian and Hindu influence. However, we should also remember that this influx of Hindu women in the Mughal house was unilateral and no Mughal lady is recorded to have entered any Rajput Royal house. Hence the Rajput Zenana Dyodhi becomes very important both due to its close relations with Mughal harem and as a separate entity. Therefore I have tried to compare the Mughal harem with the Rajput Zenana Dyodhi in the present work.

The biggest challenge while writing this work came in the form of unbiased source of information. I tried to overcome the problem of reliable source material by extensive research and wide reading. Both primary as well secondary sources were referred while working on this topic. Many libraries and museums were visited that not only enhanced my understanding but also helped evolve an analytical perspective. I think this is of tremendous help while writing on a contradictory topic with so many layers and complexities. It is of paramount importance to develop a holistic attitude in order to appreciate different points of view. Frequent visits to places of historical importance related to the topic of study were also undertaken. From the Mughal capital cities of Agra, Delhi and Fatehpur Sikri to cities and forts of Rajasthan formed integral part of my study. Forts of Amer, Jodhpur, Udaipur, Chittorgarh etc. threw floods of light on the workings of the Rajput Zenana Dyodhi that also form part of the present work.

The present work is unique because I have tried to remain unbiased and impartial in its study. I have tried to refrain from either ostracizing this Mughal institution of Harem

or from glorifying it. After my research I have come to the conclusion that like everything else in life the Mughal harem was a mixture of both good and bad. I have weighed both the pros and cons of harem life. Instead of indulging in unnecessary romanticizing it has been tried to adopt an objective attitude. It has been my honest endeavor to uplift the shroud of secrecy from the lives of the women inhabiting the Mughal zenana. It was indeed a daunting task to uncover the myths surrounding the Mughal female royalty. As a woman writing on a women centric topic from a modern perspective I have tried to consider different varying and contradicting aspects related to the present topic.

While writing this work I tried to adopt a comprehensive approach. I not only consulted primary sources comprising of firsthand accounts like memoirs and autobiographies from the period as well as foreign traveler accounts. Secondary sources like modern works of Indian as well as foreign authors, journals etc. have also been widely consulted. Due to this wide variety of source material my viewpoint became more rational and analytical. Various field trips to the places of relevance to the present study were also taken. In fact walking through the harem enclosures I could feel the regality, sophistication, and strict bindings of the zenana life. Local guides and residents were always there to help with their vast pool of anecdotes and valuable information. All this put together made the research experience for me both endearing and challenging at the same time. I sincerely hope that the labor that has gone into the writing of this work will help to know about the Mughal harem and its inmates in a better light. I also wish that the young women of today get to learn about the trials and tribulations, sorrows and joys of the women who inhabited a world very different from ours. Thus putting to rest the speculation and mystery regarding this topic.

PREFACE

The idea of choosing the harem life of the Mughals as my Ph.D. research topic germinated while I was doing my Post Graduation in History and was writing upon Nurjahan as the subject of my Dissertation paper. During the writing of that work I not only became more interested in the private life of the Mughals especially of their women which has been shrouded in extreme obscurity. Except for few casual references by Persian chroniclers and foreign traveler accounts this subject has remained to be somewhat unexplored. Although volumes have been written recording the territorial and military exploits of Mughal kings but the women have remained more or less at the sidelines. They either remain absent from the records or can be seen relegated to the margins. It is almost certain that owing to *Purdah* and consequent seclusion of women from public eye the contemporary court chroniclers won't have had direct access to the lives of harem inmates and because of state patronage it won't have been possible for them to record whatever they knew. However during the course of my writing I found that many intelligent hints have been dropped by them which give us insight into the domestic world of the Mughals. Hence we naturally have to depend upon the foreign traveler accounts from the period to know about the private life of the Mughal men and women. However extreme caution is required while going through these accounts given the scandal and gossip loving attitude of these writers. While the court chroniclers have only good things to say about their masters and mistresses the foreign traveler accounts are full of fantasized accounts far away from reality. Hence the basic idea of writing on the present topic was to delineate the truth that lay somewhere in between these extreme opinions. Going by the foreign traveler accounts it seems that the harem was a veritable pleasure sanctuary meant for the sexual gratification of one man-the King and the women lodged inside the harem precincts were nothing more than articles of his pleasure. Ironically while the master could hoard as many beauties as possible the women were expected to remain faithful to their husband. Then there is another cause that prompted me to write this work and that was the true dearth of unbiased material on private life of Mughals specially Mughal ladies that was a big problem that I faced during my dissertation writing. It is quite interesting to note that some quality work on leading Mughal ladies like Nurjahan and Jahanara has come from modern foreign writers and not Indians.

Last but not the least what prompted me to write the work in hand was to find the true nature of harem and the condition of the women lodged inside. Private life of the Mughals has remained a relatively little known and understood subject of historical debate. In today's time when women's discourse has become so important it is but natural to discuss the condition of women in the times gone by because in it lie the seeds of the present condition of women specially of the minority community. However, the concept of harem has become obsolete today but we can't consider it irrelevant because the rule of Kings might have gone but women are still in chains blighted by many limitations. The strong ladies of the past can not only inspire our young generation but many valuable lessons too can be learnt from the mistakes of the past. I hope that the present thesis work which is written on a women centric topic from a woman's perspective would be able to do service both to the cause of history and society.

During the course of my research work I visited many libraries with regard to searching reading and reference material. The important ones were the National Archives, Delhi; Aligarh Muslim University Library, Aligarh; Raza Library, Rampur; Agra College Library, Agra and K.R.P.G College Library, Mathura. Reference material consisted of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources comprised of memoirs and auto biographies like that of Babur, Gulbadan Begum, Jahangir and foreign traveler accounts from that period. While secondary sources consisted of modern works related to the subject, encyclopedias, hand books, and journals. Numerous field trips were also undertaken to places of historical importance like Delhi, Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Udaipur, and Chittorgarh among others. During these field trips many tourist guides and local residents gave valuable information, which bettered my understanding of the facts besides clearing many doubts.

In retrospect we can say that the harem was a full-fledged institution. It was a separate state body with a mammoth administration of its own. Sexual activity was only a part and not the end of it because the residents of the harem included all the female relatives of the emperor. Polygamy was an accepted practice among the medieval Royalty hence it won't be appropriate for us to blame the Mughals for keeping large harems. In fact in those days the size of a king's harem marked his

power and influence. During the course of my writing I discovered that harem was not just a pleasure sanctuary but was a rich socio-cultural institution that acted as bedrock to the Mughal establishment. It is interesting to note that the Harem had a more fluid character during the time of first two Mughals-Babur and Humayun and it took its final shape and character during the time of Akbar. Like many of his other novel institutions Akbari Harem too was peculiar. Most noticeable change came in the position of women whose total seclusion became the trademark of Mughal harem now onwards. So much so that they become literally invisible in the contemporary chronicles. Women in fact came to be known by their titles and not names. In fact Akbar's idea of reposing chastity in the female body was a direct Rajput influence on him.

We can't deny that women lived a secluded life in the harem. The vagaries of a polygamous household must have been telling on these ladies. The weaker ones often succumbed to it as we see happening in the case of Manbai. However, in the same harem flourished many talented, enterprising, and dynamic women who played significant role in their time. As seasoned family matriarchs these Mughal women acted as peace makers in the troubled world of the Mughal family. As mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives the harem ladies influenced not just the private but public life of the monarch. Hamida Banu, Gulbadan Begum, Bakhtunnisa, Nurjahan, Mumtaz Mahal, , Jahanara, Roshanara, Zeb-un-Nisa, Zinat-un-Nisa etc. are few notable names of the women who exerted tremendous influence on the politics of their time. Being young and beautiful did help these women to attain a place in the imperial abode but beauty couldn't last forever. Here came handy other attainments of these women. From building fine edifices to doing business and from composing sweet verses to arranging feasts and celebrations Mughal women performed a variety of roles.

Hence we can say that the inhabitants of Royal seraglio were a strange mix of happiness and sadness, want and luxury, longing and fulfillment. They indeed reveled in all kinds of luxury but were these amenities sufficient to fill the deep void in their lives. For we certainly have strong female characters appearing on the scene of Mughal history but they seem quiet few given the long span of the Mughal dynasty. However we can't deny these women being an important part of the Mughal dynasty as besides doing the job of securing the family line through reproductive activity they were the cohesive binding force that brought the mutually conflicting

opinions and rising tempers under control. As for the application and usefulness of the present topic Harems exist no more but their memory lingers on as part of the general perception. What we need to do is to enforce and propagate the true character of the harem instead of the stereotypical image of the same, It would help great deal in giving new role models to the present generation and specially to the women of the minority community. To come to know that some 400-500 years ago *Pardanasheen* women participated in trading activity, were engaged in building fine structures, excelled in intellectual pursuits like reading, composing poetry, trained in martial arts and some of them were even expert shots women would definitely inspire the young girls toward achieving more higher and positive goals in life. Not to forget we can also learn valuable lessons from the period gone by. Polygamous harem life could not have been a welcome choice for the harem inmates. For it is unfair and unjust to expect complete fidelity out of women with men keeping no tab over their unbridled lust.

Finally although I have tried to cover all the aspects of Mughal harem life in the present study ranging from social, political and economic aspects of it from 1526 to 1707. However as a suggested topic of further study to explore the present aspects of Mughal harem life during the time of later Mughals i.e. from 1707-1857 would be an excellent preposition. In fact we can undertake a comparative study between harem before and after 1707. Another related aspect to this subject could be the study of harems of local principalities like Awadh, states of Deccan, Bengal, and Gujarat etc. In the present study I have tried to compare the Mughal harem with the Rajput Zenana Dyodhi. This can be further explored as a separate subject of full-fledged research.

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of the present study took seeds while I chose *Nurjahan* as my subject of dissertation in my M.A.(History) final year exam. During the course of my writing I not only found dearth of material on the subject but also became all the more interested in the private life of the Mughals. Incidentally I came to know that Nurjahan like all other female relations of the Mughal Emperors lived in the *Harem* under strict seclusion. Thus naturally there arose the desire to know about generations of these women who spent their entire lives in the seclusion of *Purdah*. It was a happy coincidence that my Ph.D. guide Dr Pradeep Kumar was also keenly interested in the topic and asked me to explore the topic further. He not only gave valuable inputs to give a concrete shape to my rough idea of the subject but also helped me during the synopsis preparation stage with his rich knowledge on the topic. However at the synopsis stage the time frame for the study was not fixed. During the RDC meeting the research committee expert Dr D.B.Ojha suggested some valuable additions besides specifying the time limit for the proposed work. Hence in the present work the Mughal Harem has been studied within the reigns of first six Mughals ranging from Babur to Aurangjeb. Therefore the present work has become two- dimensional in its approach as it not only covers the exact nature of Mughal harem life but also discusses the political, economic, and socio-cultural condition as well as contribution of its inmates. Side by side I have endeavored to discuss the character and personality of the first six Mughal Emperors as we know that the only male presence in the Harem was that of the Emperor. Hence it becomes somewhat essential to discuss their individual preferences and persona, which gave harem its tone and tenor.

During the course of my writing I also faced lack of material covering the domestic life of the Mughals. Mostly one has to depend upon the foreign traveler accounts to know about the private life of Mughal Emperors and their harems. However being foreigners the sensibilities of these travelers were not akin to ours and owing to difference in language, color, creed, and race they have become overtly judgmental about what they saw in India. Their accounts are laden with scandals and gossip pertaining to the Royal family. Hence we can't blindly trust whatever they say. As far as modern works on the subject are concerned while reams of paper have been spent writing about the political and territorial achievements of the Mughal monarchs, their social, religious and

economic policies. The private side of their life has remained more or less shrouded in obscurity. All in all the Mughal history is male centric, women either remain absent from the accounts or only appear at the fringes. Once in a while we have characters like Nurjahan and Jahanara taking centre stage in the affairs of the state. In fact not Indian but foreign writers have authored works on prominent Mughal women like Nurjahan and Jahanara. Women's writing on history has been a rarity in our country specially women writing upon topics of female interest. Though during the past decade or so the scene has somewhat changed with women choosing to write upon Historical subjects and that too women oriented topics. Still there is a lot of scope for further work in this area.

The questions that perplexed and prompted me to undertake a study of the Mughal harem were varied and many. The most intriguing of them was the question that what was the true character of the harem ? Whether it was a sexual reverie where the King could indulge in all kind of frivolities at the expense of women's happiness and self respect or was it a unique socio-cultural establishment that gave its residents unbounded power and influence in a unique way. Furthermore I was baffled by the mutually contradictory images of harem that appeared due to contesting opinions of the court chroniclers and foreign traveler accounts from the period. While almost all the European travelers have picturized the imperial *haremsara* as a pleasure house meant to satisfy the inordinate lust of the Emperor with the total subjugation and marginalization of his women. The Persian chroniclers on the other hand either have remained tight lipped about the private life of their masters or have only good things to say about them. The truth however lies somewhere in between and that was the basic idea behind the conceptualization of this work- to discover the true nature of the Mughal seraglio.

Harem literally meant a forbidden place, *sanctum sanctorum* i.e. in context of a polygamous household enclosed quarters of women of a Muslim family forbidden to other men. By women of the family are meant the mother(s), aunts, sisters, wives, daughters, concubines, female attendants, entertainers etc. of the Emperor or nobleman. The word Harem specifically denotes Muslim female quarters but this system was prevalent almost among all the medieval societies. Even in India polygamy was

practiced among medieval Hindu royalty and harem was known as *Raniwas* or *Zenana Dyodhi* among the Rajputs. The basic concept of the harem was to provide a safe and structured living condition to the vast entourage of women that a king had. Strict purdah and seclusion was observed, high security measures were adopted to avoid any kind of unwanted entry to the harem premises. In fact it won't be wrong to say that it was an all women's world with its own rulings. However we should remember that against the general perception all the women residents of zenana did not have a sexual purpose to serve. As they resided the Emperors most revered and respected female relations like mother, step-mothers, foster mothers, sisters, aunts, daughters etc. Hence to presume that the harem was nothing more than a pleasure sanctuary would be erroneous. It was like any other household with the family matriarch or the King's mother or grandmother being held in extreme awe. Sexual activity was indeed a prominent part of it but it was not the end of it.

Today when feminist studies have become relevant the present study serves the purpose of doing the job of preserving our history for future generations. It is supposed to give them a better understanding of our past also. The general perception of medieval age renders it discriminatory and exploitative towards women in character but looking closely at those times I found that in few contexts the *pardanasheen* women of the times gone by were independent and emancipated like their modern counterparts. They did trade, built beautiful buildings, wrote sweet couplets, acted as advisors and peace makers in the world of Mughal family. Hence we find them emerging as confident, educated and talented ladies happy in their space. However the challenges that they faced were many from the vagaries of a polygamous household to the incessant warfare that was a constant part of medieval age. Women like war booty were a prized possession and this rendered their condition precarious. The strength and happiness of a woman came from her husband and the moment he died their power ceased automatically. For no matter how capable a woman was she could take no part in power sharing. In fact in the entire range of Medieval Indian history Razia Sultan was the only Muslim woman to have sat on the throne of Hindustan.

The basic challenge that I faced while writing this work was to sift fact from fiction and romance from reality. It was a daunting task because as already mentioned native writers either have been silent about the Mughal private life per se harem or have only

passed casual remarks about that. One has to read between the lines to get a clear picture. However anti-establishment writers like Badauni can be used to cross-check the assertions of traditionalists like Abul Fazal. Here too one has to be cautious as sometimes personal acrimony of non-traditionalists against the regime blights their thought process. Foreign travelers on their part have given a detailed account of Mughal domestic life but their credibility is often marred by limitations of language, time, and culture. However they can't be ignored as a valuable source of information on the subject. Modern writers unfortunately have not worked extensively on the subject and women writers choosing to write upon the *harem* is far less. Here too the authors seem divided on the nature and character of the Mughal seraglio. While the majority of them consider it as a pleasure sanctuary meant to gratify the sovereign's desires at the expense of women's happiness and freedom. The other school considers harem as a full-fledged socio-cultural institution with its separate administration. For them its residents were happy and contented souls. The truth lies somewhere in between and that I have tried to unravel in the present work. After consulting a lot of books and sources- old and new authored by foreign and native writers I have come to see the Mughal harem and the life of its inmates in a new light.

After undertaking a detailed study of the Mughal Harem (1526-1707 A.D.) I have come to the conclusion that the Mughal zenana was an independent institution in itself and it would be unjust to dismiss it as a meager pleasure house meant for the gratification of only one man -the Emperor. The conflict and chaos of a polygamous household would have surely curtailed women's right towards a normal life- giving rise to insecurity, jealousy, and competition among them but we should not forget that polygamy was prevalent among the medieval royalty. Hence it would be wrong to ostracize the Mughals for this vice. Many influential Mughal women have attained eternal glory in the pages of history due to their manifold contributions. Qutlugh Nigar Khanum, Gulbadan Begum, Hamida Banu Begum, Bakhtunnisa, Nurjahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahanara, Roshanara, Zebunnisa, Zinatunnisa are few notable women from the Mughal family who exerted tremendous influence in their time. Nevertheless, it has to be remembered that these were just a handful of women in the entire range of the Mughal dynasty. Among thousands only a few women could achieve distinction in their life. While motherhood unquestionably precipitated a woman's rise in the power circles. Even childless ladies could arise to position of power by dint of merit. As we see

happening in the case of Ruqaiyya Sultan Begum and Nurjahan both of whom could not give birth to Mughal progeny. Hence it seems that the harem life was filled with all sorts of luxuries. However master's unquestioned love was a rare achievement that only a few could get. Rest of them had to be content with their lavish lifestyle and the privilege of being a part of the harem of the mightiest people of their time- the Mughals.

PROBLEMS FACED IN THE WRITING OF THESIS

LACK OF UNBIASED SOURCES ON MUGHAL PRIVATE LIFE

The biggest problem that I had to face while writing this thesis was the dearth of material on the private life of the Mughals and more so of their women. Reams of paper have been spent recording the heroics of Mughal men and their territorial exploits, bravery, tenacity and greatness but their private lives have remained more or less shrouded in obscurity. Mughal court chroniclers have generally refrained from speaking about the Mughal family life and whatever veiled references they have made are full of praise for their masters and mistresses. Thus one has to look for material elsewhere like in the foreign traveler accounts from the period to get an inside view of the harem. However there are two basic flaws in their records: one is that because of their ignorance of Indian language, culture, and religions they were not able to understand and appreciate them properly and second because of their gossip loving attitude their accounts are a good mix of fantasy and reality. Under such conditions it becomes necessary to be extremely careful while using these narratives. By saying this I am not trying to undermine the importance of these accounts as a handy source material to know about the times gone by. However one has to develop the skill of reading between the lines as sometimes the court chroniclers pass very subtle hints about the domestic life of their masters.

Even in terms of modern Indian writing on private life of Mughals we do not find much work done. It is a strange coincidence that known works on the prominent Mughal women have not come from Indian but foreign hands. Women writing on historical subjects is again a rarity in our country. Although the scenario has improved during the last few years but still a lot remains to be done. Another challenge that I faced while writing the present work was to walk the thin line between fact and fiction. The Mughals for that matter are not a part of distant history still there is no unanimity among

historians and scholars about the true nature and character of the Mughal seraglio. While a section considers the Harem to be a rich socio-cultural institution meant for benefit of its inmates another section considers it as a pleasure sanctuary dedicated to the fulfillment of the unbridled lust of the monarch. Hence it was really difficult to unravel the truth considering the lack of unbiased material on the subject.

VISITS TO PLACES OF HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE RELATED TO THE TOPIC

I undertook many field trips to the historical sites and cities related with my topic of study. Chief among them being the Mughal capital cities of Agra, Delhi and Fatehpur Sikri. In my quest to understand about the concept and workings of the Rajput Zenana Dyodhi I visited the Rajasthan cities like Jaipur, Udaipur, Jodhpur and Chittorgarh. Here I would like to mention that while the famous and well known monuments and sites have been fairly covered and described in the books on the subject. There are many obscure and lesser known buildings, which are difficult to locate but are of great historical importance. For instance during my visit to the tomb of Khwajasara near Agra I came to know about many facts that I had not found in any books or articles related to the subject. The best part of these visits was not just to personally observe and see the historical palaces and forts but also to observe the surrounding environment, local stories which have been passed on from generation to generation. The local guides and residents are a rich source of information. However, one has to be careful while making use of these stories in the course of writing. As they are a healthy concoction of fact and fable. Still they help widen one's perspective and many interesting and unknown facts were unraveled courtesy the ever helpful guides. Akbar's tomb at Sikandra, Nurjahan's father Itimad-ud-Daulah's tomb the Agra Fort and tomb of Aurangzeb's wife near Aurangabad in Maharashtra called as Bibi Ka Makbara were among the other buildings that I visited.

It is also worth mentioning that because of certain limitations I could not visit certain sites personally like the tombs of Jahangir and his Begum Nurjahan near Lahore in Pakistan. However with the help of modern technology many limitations of time and travel can be overcome for example many informative videos were available on internet regarding these monuments providing ample information about them. The same however can not be said about the sites and monuments that have vanished or changed

with time like the Chandni Chowk Market in Delhi built by Mughal princess Jahanara Begum. Sadly if today anyone goes there no remnants of the past can be found. The same could be said about the tomb of Aurangzeb's daughter Roshanara in Delhi that stands in a dilapidated condition today.

VISIT TO LIBRARIES FOR COLLECTION OF MATERIAL

Besides the books that were personally purchased for my writing work I visited many libraries also in search of collecting reading and reference material. The most notable being the Aligarh Muslim University Library, Aligarh; National Archives, New Delhi; Raza Library, Rampur; Agra College Library, Agra; St John's College Library, Agra; K R College Library, Mathura. Reference material consisted of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources consisted of memoirs and auto biographies like that of Babur, Gulbadan Begum, Jahangir and foreign traveler accounts from that period. While secondary sources comprised of modern works pertaining to the subject, encyclopedias, hand books and journals. Another noteworthy challenge that I faced while writing this work was the availability of some quality books in Hindi on the subject and not English. They were of great help while writing the present work. Here I would like to make mention of some good books that I found with the Sahityagaar publications from Jaipur and Janaki publications from Patna. After searching for a long time I found many valuable and useful books from there.

PROMINENT BOOKS CONSULTED WHILE WRITING THE THESIS

Many books were consulted during the writing of the present work. A detailed description about them has been given under the Literature Review. The most useful of them all are the candid memoirs of Mughals like Babur, Gulbadan Begum and Jahangir. Out of them the work of Gulbadan Begum called Humayunama holds a special place because it is the only work of its kind written by a woman in the entire span of Mughal history. Also being a woman and resident of harem she was in a better position to explain the life in the secluded quarters. The original works have been written mostly in Persian which have been translated into English language by eminent scholars like A.S. Beveridge. The Persian court chronicler accounts like Abul Fazal's Akbarnama and Ain-i-Akbari are rich source of information about Akbari practices, culture and

etiquette. However not much can be found in them about the personal lives of the Mughal monarchs and their women. Still if read carefully we can discern many important facts about the harem life of that period. Abul Fazal gives a vivid account of the incidents of Akbar's reign but being a panegyric he is always full of praise for his master. Herein come to help accounts of anti-establishment writers like Badauni who is brutally honest and overtly critical in his Muntakhab- ul-Lubab.

Foreign travelers from the period like Manucci (Storio do Mogor), Bernier (Travels in the Mughal Empire), Mundy (The Travels of Peter Mundy in Europe and Asia), De Laet (The Empire of the Great Mogol) have been consulted for gathering profuse information on the Mughal family. The two notable modern works that helped develop perspective during the writing of this work were- The Mughal Harem, a 1988 book from renowned author K S Lal and Domesticity and Power in the Mughal World, written by Ruby Lal. Both these works helped in understanding the minute aspects of Mughal family life. Here it is important to note that while K S Lal has pictured the harem as a playground of unbridled lasciviousness, Ruby Lal has demonstrated its socio-cultural character and power. Thus one has to carefully go through them not one or two but many times to fully understand the true nature of the Mughal household and its female residents. Soma Mukherjee's book Royal Mughal Ladies was of great help in understanding the day-to-day workings of the imperial household. Another important aspect of this work was the comparison of the Rajput Zenana Dyodhi with the Mughal Harem. For this I referred to many books and *khyats*. Chief among them are Gauri Shankar Hirachand Ojha's Rajasthan ka Itihas, Colonel James Todd's Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, Kiran Shekhawat's book Zenana Dyodhi, N K Pareek's Rajdarbar aur Raniwas, Chudawat and Swarnakar's Rajasthan Ke Reeti Rivaz and Shashi Arora's Rajasthan Mein Nari ki Stithi. All of them proved to be valuable source of information in increasing my understanding of the Rajput Zenana Dyodhi and I could compare it with the Mughal harem.

In retrospect I can say that I faced a variety of problems while writing this work. From dearth of unbiased source materials to lack of contemporary Indian writing on the subject and from non-availability of some good quality books in English to inability to visit some of the sites and monuments connected with the subject of my study. However I was able to overcome these problems as already mentioned and the result is in the

form of the present work. The dearth of material was substantiated with the help of extensive and wide reading that I undertook related to the topic. As already mentioned the visits to various libraries led to widening my mental horizon besides developing a keen sense of analysis, which I think, is a necessary pre-condition for writing on a polarizing topic. The biggest beauty of History as a subject lies in its being open to discussion and debate. We need to look holistically in order to arrive at the correct conclusion. As I have repeatedly mentioned in this work the Mughal harem invokes extremely contradictory opinions in the minds of experts, scholars, students and enthusiasts of history.

Many a times it so happens that doubts arise and you find yourself overwhelmed by them. In those moments of doubt and anxiety the guiding force comes from the strangest of sources- it could be a well read Librarian with a keen interest in the subject, a tourist guide enthralling you with his wisdom over long *Chai* discussions, an interesting talk show or debate going on television, a savvy article in some newspaper. One important thing that I realized during the course of my writing was that your source of information need not always be the written word. In research you should have all your faculties open and let the information seep in. Once that phase is over its time to sieve out the unwanted from the delectable. Little did I know that the visits to the historical sites, cities, and monuments will change my outlook considerably. It is not just as part of necessary routine followed in historical research that we go and see the buildings and monuments. It not only enriches our knowledge of the subject but also expands our world view. Walking through the alleys and *Baradaris* I could feel the times gone by. Standing at the *Jharokhas* I could feel how the harem females would have glimpsed the outside world. In fact all questions get answered once you let this overflow of knowledge consume you. The written word is of course important because it is the peeping hole to history and so are the various other sources of information. However it is equally important to check the veracity of ones facts and findings because that is the basic requirement of writing good quality research work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The private life of the Mughals has remained a closely guarded secret owing primarily to the practice of *purdah* which forbade the court chroniclers to interact closely with the inmates of King's harem and also being servants of the state they chose to remain tight lipped about the private and more so controversial episodes of the life of Royal family members. However there were anti-establishment writers like (Badauni, 1990) who have left behind more open and uncensored accounts of Mughal private life from the period. (Sundaresan,2003) correctly states that the desire to know about the private aspects of people's life stems from the human desire to know secrets. However not much work has been done in the field of exploring the domestic side of Mughal emperor's life and especially to know about the condition of the ladies residing inside. As already mentioned native writers have skipped it outright in their accounts while the foreign traveler accounts seem like a concoction of truth and fantasy. (Pelsaert,1925) tells that the life in the zenana was of unbridled sexual activity with no tab over king's lust and the women were nothing more than pleasure tools to the lascivious master.

Almost all the contemporary European travelers have presented a similar picture of the Mughal harem. (Manucci,1906) informs us that "the principal relaxation of Mughals were women". While all the contemporary travelers have elaborately dwelled upon many scandals related to the members of the Mughal royal family. Della Vale has gone to the extent of charging Shahjahan committing incest with his own daughter Jahanara. (Bernier,1934) has also supported this theory. However (Prasad,1932) asks us to be precautionous while dealing with such charges calling them a product of these foreigners' vivid imagination and gossip loving nature. A careful perusal of these travelogues is indeed necessary for these foreigners suffered from the limitation of being indifferent to our language, culture, and customs. Hence they tried to judge the medieval society from their own standards, which could be often misleading and damaging to the cause of history.

As far as modern Indian writer's works on the private life of the Mughal Emperors more so from the perspective of the harem inmates is considered it seems that most of them have treaded the path shown by the European travelers.(Lal,1988) chooses to depict the

harem as a kind of pleasure sanctuary where the sovereign was the proverbial sun with women around him being like stars almost always devising ways to please the emperor. He calls the imperial seraglio the seat of conspiracy, gossip, and lasciviousness. However mention is also made of the socio-cultural ethos and activities of the harem women. (Nath,2005) seems to be towing the line of K.S.Lal however his mention of the Mughal kitchen and its workings is more elaborate and well researched. Among foreign writers working on the subject (Findly,1993) has also stressed upon the pleasure-house aspect of the seraglio but she has also stressed upon its homo social character. As her work focuses on one of the strongest female characters of Mughal history- the much celebrated and controversial Nurjahan she has tried to look at the harem more from her perspective. However Findly underlines the important part played by the harem establishment in the strengthening and perpetuation of the Mughal dynasty through subtle and discreet use of *power*, which the women gained as mothers, wives, aunts, sisters and daughters. For kingship was a male preserve among the Mughals and women did not have any direct participation in politics and statecraft.

(Mukerjee,2001) has given a detailed account of Harem life from Babur to Aurangjeb. She elaborately dwells upon the different aspects of the life of harem residents ranging from politics to doing trade, writing poetry and constructing fine buildings. All in all the life of zenana women revolved around the sovereign who was the epicenter of all activity as all the power of his women came from him hence they tried to please him in whatever manner possible. Even Nurjahan and her *junta* could work with Jahangir's consent. It was in fact a case of willing relinquishment of power by a reluctant husband rather than a case of usurpation of power by a conniving spouse. Opinions and approach of (Lal, 2005) is most novel in the context of the Mughal harem. She has stressed on the homo-social character of the harem and the important role that the women played in the making of the Mughal dynasty. She revisits the world of the Mughal family and highlights the fluid structure of harem in the times of Babur and Humayun then she goes on to compare it with the more rigid and formalized institution that haremsara became in the times of Akbar. In fact Akbar's obsession with female chastity and his imposition of family honor in the female body is shown to have bred from his Rajput relations. The total omission of women's names from Akbari chronicles and use of titles instead of names make it abundantly clear that total anonymity of harem ladies was a peculiar trait of the third Mughal's time.

(Shekhawat,2013) dwells at length on the Rajput equivalent of the Mughal harem the Zenana Dyodhi or the Raniwas. She brings to life the ethos and character of the Rajput Rawala. The inclusion of Rajput women in the Mughal harem gave a distinct flavor to it. Though no Mughal princess is recorded to have ever entered the Rajput seraglio but both the Muslim Mughal and Hindu Rajput cultures seem to have deeply impacted each other in socio-cultural context. Akbar's policy of forging matrimonial alliances with the Rajputs is of immense importance given the fact that in those times of extreme religious orthodoxy it would have been a daring decision to forge such relationships. (Mukhia,2005) has told about the causes and implications of such matrimonial alliances for both the Mughals and the Rajputs.

The life and condition of Mughal harem inmates has been variously recorded by the authorities both contemporary and modern. We have to approach with caution before coming to any final conclusion. For two extremely opposite images of the seraglio emerge with one depicting the harem ladies as virtual prisoners within the four walls of zenana, totally subjugated and given to the whims of a medieval master. While the other paints the harem as a rich socio-cultural institution with a distinct character of which the female occupants were a happy and contented part.

CHAPTER 1

HAREM OF BABUR AND HUMAYUN

Meaning of Harem

The term *Harem* has been derived from the Arabic word Harem meaning “sacred” or “forbidden”. By it we refer to that closed and cloistered part of the Imperial palace or residence which was reserved for the residence of the women of a Muslim household. This place was variously called as the *zenana*, *haremsara*, *mahalsara* and *raniwas*. Later the term *Zenani Dyodhi* came to be associated with it in the Rajput principalities¹ Going by this definition it becomes clear that at least in concept this was meant to be a place of restraint where committing any kind of inequity was forbidden. However the popular image of the harem remains to be of a place where all kinds of sexual excesses were permissible with a vast number of women gathered around one man, providing all kinds of pleasure to him²

The concept of the harem was primarily meant to provide structured living conditions to Emperor’s women while maintaining the strictest *Pardah* while also acting as a repose for him where he could relax and retire from his taxing routine and strenuous imperial duties.³ Since the powers of governance and administration were concentrated in one man (the sovereign) and he was the pivot around which the entire empire revolved it was deemed necessary to provide him with every pleasure possible on earth.

It won’t be wrong to say that the King was seen as the center of the universe and all the people around him were like the stars. Hence no pleasure on earth was supposed to be left wanting in order to please the monarch, in whose ultimate happiness lay that of all the people surrounding him whether at the court or in his harem.

In fact the concept of harem was not peculiar to Mughals of India alone. As it was a

¹ Nath 1994 :11

² Mukhia 2004 :113

³ Findly 1993: 88

common feature in all the Islamic societies of the world. Besides in India there was prevalence of this tradition in Persia under the Safavids and in the Ottoman Turkish Empire with minor differences⁴. One striking similarity between all these cultures was the emergence of strong female personalities. For instance on one hand we have Persian Princess Pari Khan Khanum who played a vital role in the succession battle. On the other there was the strong queen Hurrem in Ottoman Empire. While comparing the Mughal harem with its Central Asian counterparts we find some points of difference also. Like the kind of freedom and influence that women held in the Safavid Iran remains unparalleled elsewhere. In fact it is quite interesting to note that unlike Hindustan, unmarried daughters of the imperial family held a great political clout in Persia.⁵ This kind of prominence is not found in India and at least from the time of Akbar imperial women become almost invisible. We do have instances of strong women like Nurjahan, Jahanara, Roshanara and Zeb-un-Nisa but they are more of an exception than a general rule.

While concubines formed a politically dominant part of the Ottoman Empire it was not so in other Islamic societies like the Indian Mughals and Persian Safavids. Among Safavids Pari Khan Khanum and Shahzada Khanum daughter and sister of Persian King Shah Tahmasp respectively held considerable power and authority in their times.⁶ It is interesting to note that during the seventeenth century all the princes and princess were blinded in Iran to decapacitate them from claiming power. Hence we see that in theory even the women could be possible heirs to the throne. This was a unique Safavid practice and does not find a parallel among other Islamic societies of the world⁷ As far as Mughals of India are concerned they did love their mothers, sisters, wives and daughters but political power was a man's preserve. Even the most powerful Mughal woman of all times Nurjahan could only get to become the *de facto* ruler of her people.

1.1 The Ancient Indian Antecedent of Harem: The *Antahpura*

The practice of *Purdah* which meant the confinement of women behind veil or harem quarters was not a part of ordinary women's life in ancient India. However the kings

⁴ Lal 2005 :216

⁵ Rizvi 2000 :128

⁶ Lal 2005 :222

⁷ Babayan 1998: 352

maintained harems called Antahpur with restrictions upon their women's movement and upper class women would often cover their faces. With the advent of Muslims in India Purdah became a permanent part of Indian culture⁸ in not just the imperial but all the aristocratic families of North India. In the opinion of Dow, in India the practice of women's seclusion was more strictly observed, "where continence is a more arduous virtue than in the bleak regions of the north."⁹ In the ancient Vedic literature women were granted greater freedom of movement, thought and expression. However by the time of Kautilya, seclusion of at least king's women had become established. He tells us in his Arthashastra about the elaborate arrangements which were made regarding women's security in the Antahpur and the restrictions imposed upon their free movement. However it was not as strictly enforced as in later day Muslim societies.

Arab travelers have testified to the presence of unveiled royal ladies in imperial court but the upper class women were not allowed to mingle with men other than their husbands and close relatives. The writer of Arthashastra tells us that under the direst circumstances the women should not come out of their homes in the light of the day. In fact the upper class women even though unveiled were not allowed to come out of their homes unaccompanied by their men folk.¹⁰ In the ancient Indian literature role of women as good wives and mothers is extolled. Wifely obedience remains a recurring theme in the contemporary literature. For the ideal of Indian womanhood remains Sita who willingly shared the hardships of her husband in exile and Savitri who brought back her husband from the jaws of death. However we have instances of warlike women accompanying their husbands in the battlefield during Alexander's invasion of India¹¹. A practice which was retained by some tribes till much later.

During the Vedic period women were comparatively free and more powerful than compared to the later times. However from childhood to old age they always remained minor and dependent upon their male relations. We have few famous women seers during

⁸ Basham 2004 :180

⁹ Dow 1973 :xix.

¹⁰ Basham 2004: 181

¹¹ Basham 2004: 184

the Vedic period like Gargi, Apala, Ghosha, Lopamudra, Vishvavara etc.¹² but they were rare and the best role reserved for women was that of dutiful wives. However through the successive ages the position of women only deteriorated. During the later Vedic, Upanishad and Sutra periods the concept of *Pati Parmeshwar* gained currency and it became obligatory for women to submit to all whims and fancies of men. The biggest downfall in the condition of women was registered during the Epic period of our history. By the seventh century the Purdah system had become strong among the Royalty.¹³ However every now and then we find capable and strong female characters appearing on our land like the Punjab Queen Kumar Devi who had fought against Qutubuddin Aibak¹⁴. Likewise Queen of King Dahir who valiantly faced Muhammad Bin Qasim. However it needs to be remembered that these women came from Royal or aristocratic background and were more of exception than the general rule, the general lot of women remained bad.

The emergence of Rajput clans on the political scene of India saw further deterioration in women's condition. However the girls of rich households were well educated but on the whole they were considered as burden while sons were seen as assets. The foreign invasions were also responsible for women's poor status in society since the concern for their security rendered them vulnerable. However we must remember that the Royal women of ancient India were not as strictly secluded as were their sisters in later day Muslim societies. The earliest reference of *Antahpur* is found in Shri Harsha's work *Naishadh Charitam*. In this book Queen Damayanti's Antahpur is vividly described. In those days the King's palace was often located inside the Fort. There were many rooms and separate chambers in it. While everyone could go to the outermost set of rooms, the second level of chambers could be visited by the royal officers only. In the third level of rooms the royal kitchen was situated while the fourth and last level of apartments housed the Antahpur. Kautilya has given intricate details about the construction of Antahpur. It is notable that during Kautilya's time women amazon guards were employed to guard the king inside the Antahpur.

¹² Mishra 2011 :342-44

¹³ Arora 1981 :8-9

¹⁴ Todd 1964 : 242

The harem (antahpur) was headed by *Kancukin* an able bodied old man instead of eunuchs in other contemporary cultures. This man was a benevolent figure who was close to both the king and his queens. The literary works from the period inform us that the harem ladies were well treated. In fact the Chief Queen (*Mahishi*) was so powerful that not just the Royal ladies but even the King was in awe of her. The King's wives and concubines often indulged in drinking wine in the company of their husband.¹⁵ During the ancient period of our history men became rulers as per the usual custom. However we have many instances of influential women both on the North and south of the Vindhyas. Women like Prabhavati Gupta, Rajyashri, Akkadevi, Umadevi and Didda exerted great political power in their times. In fact *Marumakattayam* or matrilineal system of succession (where the son of the eldest sister was the heir) was followed in many Southern territories till recently.

Polygamy was the accepted system among the Royalty however the general people remained more or less monogamous. It is quite interesting to note that the contemporary literature apprises us about the instances of jealousy of King's senior wife against the junior wives. However sometimes the senior wives reveled in all the glory if they were mothers to sons and hence the chief wife.¹⁶ Krishna Deva Raya's harem forms an interesting subject of study during the early sixteenth century. He had twelve queens of whom three were *Patranis*. There are said to have been 1200 more women in the Antahpur of KDR. Many of them were expert swordswomen and archers while many others were wrestlers.¹⁷ Thus it becomes clear that the King was the undisputed and unquestioned master of the harem establishment. All his wishes lay supreme, in fact the emperor was the proverbial sun, and the women around him were like stars vying for his attention for it was their sole claim to power and prestige. However, we cannot infer from this that the harem was a sanctuary to gratify unhindered sexual excesses of a despotic ruler. It was a socio-cultural institution with its own administration; which was run on the lines of any other independent royal office. All efforts were made to ensure sanctity and privacy of the seraglio. It contained the most sensitive elements besides the king who himself used to spend considerable time there. He slept and took food there. Noting the condition of women in seraglio Ellison

¹⁵ Basham 2004: 92

¹⁶ *ibid*:175

¹⁷ Sewell 2008: 247-249

Banks Findly notes that in a society where women were treated mainly as pleasure givers it was no mean achievement to acquire a productive place.

1.2 Condition of Women in India on the Eve of Mughal Invasion

The victory of Babur against Ibrahim Lodi in the battle of Panipat (1526) lay the seeds of Mughal rule in India and for the next two centuries or so the Mughals remained the rulers of Hindustan. When the Mughal rule was founded in India the women of this country were going through a very bleak phase. The deterioration in their condition that had set in during the later Vedic period had hit an all-time low. Practices like child marriage, purdah, Sati and dowry etc. had become prevalent. While the birth of a daughter was a cause of misery that of a son was a source of great happiness. Purdah became a staple part of North Indian society as both Hindu and Muslim women practiced it. However Muslims practiced it with more rigidity. Among Hindus only low class women could move out of their homes freely. In fact they assisted their men folk in day-to-day activities.

Polygamy was common among the Muslims while there was no restriction upon the Hindus. The ordinary people generally refrained from having more than one wife more so because of economic limitations. However both Hindu and Muslim ruling class and nobility were polygamous. Big harems were considered as a mark of social respect and prestige. There was no provision for divorce among the Hindus while divorce and remarriage was common among the Muslims.¹⁸ While education of ordinary girls and women was generally neglected owing to the practice of purdah, the Royal ladies and upper class women did not suffer from such handicaps for private tutors were arranged for them within the harem premises. Hence High born women were mostly well educated and many were experts in the art of warfare besides mastering ladylike arts like embroidery and music. In keeping with the general practice birth of a son was desired even among royalty but once born daughters were tended with love and affection. Many capable Hindu and Muslim women dominated their times owing to their talent, grit, and determination. It is important to understand that the power and prestige the inmates of harem went on to acquire in the succeeding centuries had its seeds in the time gone by. Many capable and

¹⁸ Findly 1993

talented ladies left an indelible mark on the façade of time. It is an accepted fact that the Mughal ladies had no role in power sharing but they exerted tremendous influence on the King as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters. All the powerful Mughals from Babur to Aurangzeb paid heed to the advice and suggestions of their female relations. This was in keeping with our tradition and culture as since ancient times women were held in high esteem in the society.

Our history is filled with numerous such examples of talented women who carved a niche for themselves because of their caliber and tenacity. Women in our culture have always been held in high esteem both inside as well as outside the four walls of home. Traditionally women have been hailed in their roles as mother, wife, sister, and daughter.¹⁹ In Hindu Dharma women have been accorded a very high status they are worshipped as the supreme *Shakti*.²⁰ In fact there is a separate cult devoted to mother goddess. She has been revered as the mother-the source of creation. Scriptures like Rigveda and Upanishads are replete with mention of female seers who composed hymns. Few of them like Ghosha, Apala, Lopamudra, Gargi, Maitreyi are known for their intellect and wisdom. In fact God is called *Ardhanarishwara* i.e. half female. Interestingly there was no restriction in the ancient Hindu society that the sons must inherit their father's name. We have many such examples where heroes of Hindu tradition have been named after their mothers like Arjun is called *Kaunteya* i.e. son of Kunti; Lord Krishna is called *Devakiputra*- son of Devaki; Sanskrit grammarian Panini is called *Dakshiputra*.

Coming to the medieval period the most glaring example of women empowerment is Razia Sultan who was the first and only woman who sat on the throne of Hindustan. Even the most celebrated women from the succeeding Mughal period like Nurjahan, Mumtaz Mahal or Jahanara could not get this lofty position. However Akbar's step sister Bakhtunnisa did become the governor of Kabul. As for Razia, she was the daughter of Delhi Sultan Iltutmish who chose her to be his successor over his sons, in full knowledge of her various accomplishments. She was famed to be an astute diplomat besides being a fine swordswoman. However the decision to nominate her as the successor superseding the

¹⁹ Srivastava 1952.

²⁰ Chaudhary 1924.

claim of her brothers was an unconventional decision in those times, as the Turkish nobility was not prepared to accept a woman as their ruler. Her reign was short lived yet she left an indelible mark over the collective consciousness of many generations of women.

It won't be wrong to say that Razia Sultan was the forerunner in the field of establishing political supremacy of women in India. Many influential women dominated the Indian political scene in the centuries that followed like Mughal Queens and Princesses who exerted tremendous influence over their time. Not just at the Mughal court but in distant provinces also many women carved a niche for themselves through dint of sheer merit and political acumen. Chand Bibi of Ahmednagar who astutely defended her state from Mughal forces of emperor Akbar; Rani Durgawati of Gond dynasty who was the Queen regent of her minor son Vir Narayan and died defending her state from invaders; Jijabai, mother of brave Maratha hero Shivaji and Holkar Queen of Maratha Malwa kingdom Ahilya Bai Holkar are the names of few such illustrious women in our history. There is a long list of famous women who through their sagacity, tact, and military prowess came out of shackles of Purdah and seclusion and took charge of the politics of their time.

However it is an undisputed fact that Razia is a strong connecting link between the brave women of ancient and modern India. Her achievement becomes all the more important because she rose to prominence at a time when women had become objectified and they really had no place in power sharing. Razia was and still remains the subject of many popular legends. Famous historian Minhaz has said about her, "She was a great sovereign, sagacious, just, beneficent, the patron of the learned, a dispenser of justice, the cherisher of her subjects and of warlike talent, and was endowed with all the qualities befitting a king, but she was not born of the right sex and so in the estimation of men all these virtues were worthless."²¹. This observation sums up the general attitude of medieval period towards women. No doubt many women rose to pinnacle of glory owing to their abilities but generally that was in their capacity as mothers, wives and daughters of powerful men of their times. Razia too is not an exception as she was the daughter of Sultan Iltutmish. However her real achievement lies in being the only female ruler who sat on the throne of Hindustan.

²¹ Srivastava 1952:105

Razia's father Iltutmish was a fine judge of human character and ability. It is no surprise that he recognized her talent at a young age and nominated her as his successor during his lifetime. This was nothing short of a revolutionary step, as he became the first and only sultan in the entire history of Delhi sultanate to appoint his daughter as the heir apparent. nobility had no intention of acceding to Iltutmish's disregard for tradition in appointing a woman as his successor.²² However, Razia ruled for only three and half years. i.e. 1236 A.D.-1240 A.D. she introduced many reforms in the government. Unfortunately she was not able to reconcile the Muslim nobility with the fact of being ruled by a woman. The true achievement of Razia Sultan lies in the fact that she remains inspirational for every little girl who dreams big and is told that she is not as good as her brother.

1.3 Beginning of the Mughal Harem

In Islam haram has been designated as the *sanctum sanctorum*, the innermost private chambers which included the private residential quarters as well as the *haraman* (haram ladies). Like many other Mughal institutions Haram too took a decisive shape during Akbar's time but it was present in the time of Babur also however in a more fluid state. First of all it is very important to note that Babur could be the ruler of Hindustan for just four years and in that short period he was fighting wars thus he could not provide a settled base to Mughal rule in India, an unfinished feat later accomplished by his illustrious grandson Akbar. Thus it becomes all the more important to study the nature of Mughal household during Babur's time. As Ruby Lal points out in Domesticity and power in the early Mughal world that during wars *ahl va 'ayal* (wives, children, servants, other women and goods) moved with the King's retinue²³ thus devoiding it of any stability. In Baburnama haram does not exist as a distinct entity but is rather used to denote *all* women. In fact we do not find mention of settled women's quarters during Babur's time, all that we known of female dwellings are tent structures.

During the initial phase of Mughal rule in India especially in Babur's time chastity was not

²² Zakaria 1966:108

²³ Lal 2005:

yet reposed in the female body as became the case later²⁴ as we have many instances of garden parties in which women relatives of the king openly participated-indulged in intoxicants and had fun. Another noticeable feature is that while in Babur's time all the Royal princesses were given away in marriage, sometimes even twice or thrice and no taboo was attached to it. However the later day Mughal daughters were not so lucky and spinsterhood became the fate of many. Thus before considering Babur's or any ruler's marriages it becomes imperative to understand the socio-cultural beliefs and political obligations of the medieval age. For what might seem reckless licentiousness today was an accepted norm in the age gone by.

It is an established fact that the swelling number of women in a sovereign's harem marked high social status in that age.²⁵ We know that the Mughals were Sunni Musalmans and *Shariat* restricts a man from having more than four wives at a time, but the needs of that age were different given women could be easily procured from the slave market; need for progeny (the more the merrier); as also the contemporary approach towards women that objectified them and considered them as 'prized war booty'. All these factors gave rise to the concept of *mutah* marriages (temporary in nature contracted for a fixed sum of money). Not to mention the large fleet of slave girls and concubines maintained for their pleasure. One more thing to be kept in mind is that this practice did not remain limited to the ruling class only, in fact rich and powerful people like the nobles also maintained big harems.²⁶

In the context of these facts it becomes imperative to explore the new identity that the term harem came to bear since the time of Akbar. "Harem, in the Akbari chronicles refers both to physical structures, the secluded quarters where royal women lived, and to the women themselves who lived in those dwellings."²⁷ Pages of History are abound with numerous such examples where Royal Sovereigns maintained large harems to mark their imperial power and superiority. It was considered as a symbol of respectability that would enhance their status in the eyes of people. Thus contrary to the modern notions of fidelity and

²⁴ *ibid*: 178

²⁵ Nath 2005: 25

²⁶ *ibid* : 25

²⁷ Lal 2005: 176

monogamy, the large fleet of king's women was an established medieval practice that had its roots in the past and it was not seen as injustice to those women or as a mark of King's wanton sexuality. Sasanian King Khusrau I is said to have mastered 12000 women. Close in his shoes was Darius, King of Persia who too had a mammoth harem. When Alexander defeated him, he not only occupied his harem but copied him by keeping the same number of concubines as Darius did.²⁸

1.3.1 Harem of Babur

The founder of Mughal rule in India Babur was born to Umar Sheikh Mirza and Qutluq Nigar Khanam on 14 February 1483²⁹ in his veins flew the blood of two great Asian warriors Chengiz Khan and Timur Beg as he was descended from Amir Timur from his father and Chinghiz Khan from his mother's side. After the death of his father Babur became the ruler of the small principality of Fargana at a very young age. The year was 1526 and the battleground was the much famed Panipat where the war fought between Ibrahim Lodhi and Babur decided that who was to rule India for more than three centuries to come with the brief period of fifteen years that saw the ouster of Babur's son and successor Humayun at the hands of Sher Shah Suri from the throne of Hindustan (1540-1555) and establishment of Sur dynasty in India.³⁰ Babur who became the ruler of Fergana at the tender age of twelve years was a man of various talents not only was he a great military general and strategist who led his men from the front in all his expeditions as he was spirited, resolute and ambitious, master of a commanding personality. However, interestingly and somewhat surprisingly he was a man of letters too, not only was he a fine poet but there is something unique to his credit, the authorship of his memoirs known to the world as the Baburnama.³¹:

In his memoirs Babur mentions the names of his female relatives without any reservation. Babur had many wives they were: Aisha Sultan Begum, Zainab Sultan Begum (died childless), Maham Begum (mother of Humayun), Masuma Sultan Begum, Dildar Begum (mother of Hindal and Gulbadan Begum), Gulrukh Begum (Kamran and Askari's mother),

²⁸ Ahmad 1992: 14,17,18

²⁹ Early 1997: 5

³⁰ Lal 1988: 20

³¹ Ibid : 20

Bibi Mubarika or Afghani Agachah. Gulnar³² and Nargul Agachah³³ were slave girls gifted to Babur by Shah Tahmasp of Iran in 1526. Both of whom went on to acquire a very prominent status in the Mughal Harem. A closer look at Babur's marriages gives us an insight into the political and emotional nature of marriage in the complex medieval world. Of her marriage with Aisha Sultan Begum Babur candidly remarks, "Although my affection for her was not lacking still it was my first marriage, and I was so bashful that I went to her only once every ten, fifteen, or twenty days. Later on I lost my affection altogether, but I was still very bashful. Once every month or forty days my mother the Khanim drove me to her with all the severity of a quartermaster."³⁴

About his marriage with Masumeh Begum, daughter of his paternal uncle Sultan Ahmad Mirza Babur recounts that on her first meeting with him she was "inclined towards him"³⁵. As of his marriage to Zainab Sultan Begum he notes that the marriage was solemnized "through the good offices of my mother"³⁶. What seems interesting here is the fact that out of these ladies Aisha Sultan Begum, Masumeh Begum and Zainab Begum were related to him through blood (they were all daughters of his paternal uncles) thus filial bondings played a major role in matrimonial arrangements. Looking at the political nature of marriage alliances of medieval times we can take Babur's marriage to Bibi Mubarika or Afghani Agachah. We are told that she came from enemy clan of Yusufzays and after marriage on her insistence Babur improved his relations with the Yusufzays.

Here is the conversation recorded between husband and wife on this matter in Gulbadan Begum's *Ahval* "I have a petition to make. If an order be given, I will make it." (Bibi Mubarika) taking up her dress in her hands she further said, "Think that the whole Yusufzai tribe is enfolded in my skirt, and pardon their offences for my sake." To this Babur is said to have said, "I forgive the Yusufzai all their offences in thy presence, and cast them all into thy skirt. Hereafter I shall have no ill- feeling to the Yusufzai."³⁷ Here it won't be out of place to mention about Babur's liking of a young boy named Baburi, who dwelled in

³² Mukerji 2001: 22

³³ Bevrige 1994: 2,3

³⁴ Beveridge 1997: 120

³⁵ Ibid: 306

³⁶ Ibid: 48

³⁷ Beveridge 1994: 91

the bazaar.³⁸ Recording his feelings in his diary, he writes, "before this I had never felt a desire for anyone, and neither did I listen to talk of love and affection nor did I speak of such things."³⁹ His heart was so immoderately affected by this incident that he wrote a corny poem to celebrate this feeling:

May no one be so distraught and devastated by love as I; May no beloved be so pitiless and careless as you.⁴⁰

He further elaborates, "In the throes of love, in the foment of youth and madness, I wandered bareheaded and barefoot around the lanes and streets and through the gardens and orchard, paying no attention to acquaintances or strangers, oblivious to self and others."⁴¹

Babur's longing for Baburi is quite significant given the frankness with which he describes it in his memoirs, his homosexual instincts are openly displayed without any kind of stigma or reservation attached to it something that became anathema in the era of his grandson Akbar who considered it a filthy and disgraceful practice. Thus we see that element of love and personal choice is rare though not completely missing in the matrimonial alliances forged by Babur for we are discreetly told by his daughter Gulbadan of his "affection" for Maham Begum. She vividly mentions the warm welcome given by Babur on her arrival in Hindustan as she recounts how on hearing of her arrival "My royal father did not wait for a horse to be saddled but set out on foot"⁴² This information is of considerable importance because nowhere else in her *Ahval* does the authoress mention any kind of special affection shown by the king towards any of his other wives. Besides the lawfully wedded wives there were mistresses also who sometimes owing to Emperor's affection held important place in the royal household as is evident from the case of Gulnar and Nargul Agachah, Babur's concubines. The holy Quran as well as Muslim tradition allows a person not to have more than four wives. Though it is true that Babur was polygamous yet he maintained a moderate haram and doesn't seem to have unnecessarily hoarded women. For instance if he wanted

³⁸ Thackston 1993: 152

³⁹ *ibid*: 152

⁴⁰ *Ibid*: 153

⁴¹ Thackston 1993 : 153-154

⁴² Beveridge 1994: 100-101

he could have easily taken charge of Ibrahim Lodi's harem after latter's defeat at Panipat, on the contrary he not only distributed the ladies among nobles and princes but even sent some dancing girls to his Queens back in Kabul.⁴³

1.3.1.1 Authority of a Wife and a Mother during Babur's Time

We come to notice that after marriage, issue of reproduction was of paramount importance in the Mughal household. Giving birth to progeny more so male children enhanced a wife's status and it was a definite step forward in the relationship hierarchy. For instance Babur is all praise for his maternal grandmother Isan Dawlat Begum for her political sagacity, intellect and wisdom as much for her role as a mother to three daughters, thus keeping alive the line of Khans⁴⁴. In Baburnama great stress is laid upon the marriage of women of illustrious lineage to dynasts and resultant motherhood. Wives were respected for keeping alive the family name by producing illustrious sons. "although he (Yunis Khan) had other wives, the mothers of the sons and daughters were these two-Isan Dawlat Begum and Shah Begum"⁴⁵ Even those concubines who bore children were respected for their reproductive role in Mughal household.

Writing about mistresses of his uncle Sultan Mahmud Mirza, Babur says "The chief concubine was Zuhra Begi Agha, an Uzbek...she had one son and one daughter .He had many mistresses. By two of them he had two daughters Rajab Sultan and Muhibb Sultan."⁴⁶ and there was provision for sending back women if they failed to fulfill the all so essential reproductive duty. Ulus Agha, one of the wives of Umar Sheikh Mirza (Babur's father) gave birth to a daughter who died in infancy. Ulus Agha was sent back to her native place. Thus we witness child bearing as a necessary obligation upon women that not only gave them a strong foothold in the Mughal household but endeared them to the master as well. The profound duty of perpetuation of Timurid line lay on women's shoulders though the prime purpose of social act of marriage was of considerable political value. Mothers of

⁴³ Beveridge 1997: 633-634

⁴⁴ Lal 2005: 84

⁴⁵ Beveridge 1997: 22

⁴⁶ Ibid: 49

sons had a high status but being mother to the royal heir or the Emperor himself put them on a much higher pedestal⁴⁷ as has been the case since time immemorial.

We can better understand it with the example of Maham Begum (Humayun's mother) procuring custody of Gulbadan Begum and Hindal from their biological mother Dildar Begum. This not only shows her maternal insecurity but desire to be in control also as many of her children had died in infancy. Gulbadan Begum informs us of her adoptive mother's concern during the period of her son and heir apparent Humayun's illness. Maham reportedly said to Babur, "Do not be troubled about my son. You are a king... You have other sons. I sorrow because I have only this one." To this Babur replied: "Maham! although I have other sons, I love none as I love your Humayun. I crave that this cherished child may have his heart's desire and live long, and I desire the kingdom for him and not for others, because he has not his equal in distinction."⁴⁸ The famous episode of Babur's sacrifice of his life in lieu of his son and successor Humayun's recovery is recorded in histories of that time and after.

The above description makes it abundantly clear that mothers of sons and particularly heirs had a privileged position and they gained supremacy over other wives of the king. It is a fact that a woman no matter how beautiful could not retain her master's interest for a long time in a polygamous household, here motherhood came as safe refuge for these women to maintain their status, not everyone was as enterprising and lucky as Nurjahan to enjoy the king's affection in spite of not providing the coveted son to the Emperor. Contemporary chronicles inform us that many of Maham Begum's children died in infancy while Masumeh, Babur's daughter from her wife with the same name died at birth, Dildar Begum lost five children in babyhood while two of Babur's wives viz. Bibi Mubarika Yusufzay and Zainab Begum died childless. The immaculately preserved details of childless women as well as dead children during this period underline the great importance attached to conception and childbirth in the Mughal family.⁴⁹

Right from the inception of Mughal rule in India the senior ladies of the household enjoyed

⁴⁷ Lal 2005: 121

⁴⁸ Beveridge 1994: 104-105

⁴⁹ Lal 2005: 123

an influential position. We should not forget that Mughal emperors were extremely affectionate and caring toward their sisters though sometimes born from different mothers for instance Khanzada Begum was not Babur's real sister but she went through many hardships for the sake of her brother and his empire in return Babur dearly loved her and she was accorded a very warm welcome when she came back to the Mughal family after a period of ten years.⁵⁰ The high and exalted status of Maham Begum (Humayun's mother) as mentioned in Gulbadan Begum's *Ahval-i Humayun Badshah* gives us a sneak peek into the complex world of Mughal family and standing of senior imperial mothers in it more so mothers of the heir apparent. It was only for her high position in the Royal house that Maham Begum could interfere in the issue of her son Humayun's succession to the imperial throne. Gulbadan categorically states in her writings about the edge that Maham Begum had over her other co-wives.

However, motherhood reinvigorated a woman's position in the Mughal house and elevated her to the coveted seniors club, yet there were other claimants to this group like the king's favorite wife, experienced and elder women of the family etc. To understand this better we can revisit the instance in the *Ahval* when during his struggle for power with Humayun, his brother Kamran sought Dildar Begum's advice on the future course of action he should undertake, she discreetly told him to pursue the matter with Khanzadeh Begum (Babur's sister) as she was their "elder kinswoman"⁵¹. As far as Dildar Begum herself is considered she is said to have acquired the benefits of seniority later in life.

Thus through contemporary sources it becomes abundantly clear that *age factor* played a major role in the shaping up of women's roles and position in the imperial household (besides motherhood). The paramountcy of king's favorite over her rivals is not often seen though we do know that two of Babur's concubines- Gulnar and Nargul Agacheh were very close to him during his last time and both of them went on to acquire respectable position in the imperial haram.⁵² Mughal history is full of such episodes where powerful sovereigns have gone extra length to pay respect to their elderly female relations. Paying

⁵⁰ Ibid: 131

⁵¹ Beveridge 1994: 161

⁵² Fazal 1902: 145

courtesy and respect to one's mother was a Chingizi custom. Abul Fazal has recorded that Babur's grandmother Shah Begum had raised Khan Mirza against him. Knowing this Babur went to her and said: "If a mother has special affection for one child, why should that cause resentment in another? There is after all no limit to her authority. I have been up long and travelled a long distance, " saying this he laid his head in her lap and slept.⁵³

It is not difficult to comprehend that in a polygamous household like that of the Mughals, the word *mother* was not restricted to one's biological mother alone. Yet if we observe minutely, faint difference always remained in women's status. As we see Babur using three different terms for women: wives are called *khawatinlar*, mistresses as *ghunchachi* and concubines as *sarai*. However it is quite interesting to note that the right of procreation was not restricted to wives alone, many royal children were born of concubines. Though traditionally these women enjoyed a lesser status than the lawfully wedded wives, in practice some of them were not only treated as equals to the Queen but the low status of these women did not considerably affect their children's future prospects as well. In fact some of them went on to win their father's affection more than those who had Emperor's wives as their mothers. Still feeble hints at somewhat differentiated status owed to children born of concubines are found.

Babur has recorded names of wives of influential men only if they bore them children or they had accomplished something *big* like winning Emperor's affection otherwise he casually refers to them as 'many concubines and mistresses.'⁵⁴ Thus we see that after wifehood stood motherhood as a natural and necessary step in the chain of events in the Mughal family, it elevated a woman's status in the harem by promoting her to the coveted 'senior' status. In his diary Babur is found adoring and admiring women for two fundamental reasons: one for their exalted lineage and / or for their being married into an illustrious family and two for their reproductive capacity.

Norms of Chastity and Conduct

Spinsterhood was not forced upon Royal princesses during the reigns of the first three Mughal monarchs, a practice that became prevalent in the time of Akbar and his successors.

⁵³ Mukhia 2004: 115

⁵⁴ Lal 1988: 85

The case of Babur's sister Khanzada Begum need special mention as it not only throws light on the contemporary ideas of chastity and morality associated with the women of the Royal family as also the fact that there was no stigma attached to women's remarriage which became a norm in Akbar's time. Gulbadan Begum mentions that once Babur was besieged in Samarqand by his arch rival Shiybani Khan Uzbek and he failed to get assistance from any of his close relations. At this crucial time Babur received a message from Shiybani saying "If you would marry your sister Khanzada Begum to me, there might be peace and a lasting alliance between us."⁵⁵ According to Gulbadan's *Ahval* Babur relented to this demand and after giving over the Begum to Khan he could come out of Samarqand. While in *Baburnama* a slightly different version of the story is narrated as Babur notes, "The second time I took Samarkand...I went and held the fortress for three months .The Padishahs and Begs from the surrounding territories gave me no aid or assistance whatsoever....During that interregnum Khanzada Begum fell captive to Muhammad Shiybani Khan."⁵⁶

Whichever version of the story we believe but the fact is that during the time of Babur a sister could be *sacrificed* for the welfare of the state, a proposition that seems unthinkable in the time of his grandson Akbar. We are informed through the contemporary sources that Khanzada Begum came back to the Mughals ten years later. This return signifies the fact that no stigma was attached to such women who were 'lost' and 'recovered',⁵⁷ in fact the high status accorded to Khanzada Begum upon her return is exemplary. As mentioned earlier Babur's wife Dildar Begum referred Kamran to Khanzada Begum, once when he sought her advice during his struggle with Humayun for she was considered the most senior and respectable woman in the haram. Thus we find her holding a distinguished position in the seraglio even in the time of her nephew Humayun.

As it becomes evident through the preceding paragraphs, births in the Royal house did not only ensure the continuation of the Timurid-Mughal line it also facilitated the ascendancy of the mothers in question. However we can't forget that this created rivals too as the

⁵⁵ *Ahval* 1902: fol.3b

⁵⁶ Beveridge 1997: 17-18

⁵⁷ Lal 2005: 132

women vied for king's attention and love and the most deadly weapon to destroy an adversary was to render her childless thus depriving her from gaining importance in the eyes of the royal master. It is on record that Babur's Afghan wife Bibi Mubarika was administered drugs by her competitors to stop her from having children, the scheme succeeded and she died childless. The importance of child bearing in the Mughal family gets substantiated with the given incident: Humayun being the only surviving son of his mother Maham Begum, she was very anxious to see him have children (read sons). So she married off Humayun to a lady name Mewajan, a few days later another of his wife Bega Begum announced her pregnancy.⁵⁸ At this Mewajan told of her being in the family way too. While in due course of time Bega Begum gave birth to a daughter named Aqiqa, there was no sign of baby from Mewajan's side even after ten months, to this Mewajan claimed, "My maternal aunt was in Mirza Ulugh Beg's harem. She had a son in the twelfth month; perhaps I am like her." trusting her word everyone waited for the arrival of the royal baby, but in the end all knew that she was a fraud.⁵⁹

But categorically speaking the women in the harem did not have a separate identity or life of their own, contemporary narratives do not give them much credit or importance as independent individuals, they are remembered as either wives, daughters or mothers of famous men. Importance of reproductive role of women in the Mughal world is often highlighted in the Baburnama. Mentioning about his mother and aunts (daughters of Yunus Khan and Aisan Daulat Begum) Babur writes. "The eldest was Mihr Nigar Khanum, who was married to Sultan Abu Said Mirza's eldest son, Sultan Ahmad Mirza. She had no sons or daughters by the Mirza..The second daughter was my mother, Qutluq Nigar Khanum...The third daughter was Khub Nigar Khanum. She was given in marriage to Muhammad Hussain Kuragan Dughlat, by whom she had a daughter and a son."⁶⁰

Thus we find that during Babur's time harem was not yet an institution that it later on went on to become during the times of Akbar. In Baburnama harem is equivalent of women, the generally accepted image of harem as a sanctuary to satisfy the lust of one single male, the

⁵⁸ Ibid: 62

⁵⁹ Beveridge 1994: 112-113

⁶⁰ Thackston 1993: 20-21

Emperor is missing here, even if romance forms a part of this world it is through episodes like Baburi rather than with the ladies of the household. Does that lead us to conclude that women were an invisible part of the Mughal world-the answer is a half yes and a half no in the sense that they were invisible for they didn't have an identity of their own-they are identified through their royal master and the monarchy that they are a part of.⁶¹ However, their involvement in matters of continuation of line, succession, brokering peace, organization, and arrangement of festivities and marriage celebrations etc are the more visible aspects of their existence. However, all these activities of women were considered as more of duty or service to the empire rather than personal achievements yet the part played by the women of Babur's household in the establishment and growth of the Mughal Empire is commendable.

1.4 Senior Women as Peace Makers

Senior women in the Mughal haram often brokered peace on account of their privileged position owing to age and seniority or appointment to this effect. An early example to this effect is from 1506, while on his way to Kabul from Khurasan Babur heard the news of Mirza Khan (son of Babur's maternal aunt Sultan Nigar Khanam) and Mirza Muhammad Hussain Gurakan (husband of Khub Nigar Khanam, maternal aunt of Babur) rising in rebellion against him, Babur reached Kabul and defeated the rebels. Gulbadan Begum informs us that Babur forgave the Mirzas for their mischief because of his maternal aunts.⁶² Babur mentions about this incident in his memoirs, "If I had had him ripped to pieces for undertaking such heinous and shameful actions...it would have been improper since there were family connections, his sons and daughters being my own aunt Khub Nigar Khanam's children, I kept these claims in mind and let him go free."⁶³

1.5 Humayun's Haram

Nasiruddin Muhammad Humayun was born on 6 March 1508 in Kabul. His mother was Maham Begum, Babur's third wife. At the time of Humayun's birth Babur was 26 years old. Though much information is not available about the early life of Maham Begum, all

⁶¹ Lal 2005:138

⁶² Beveridge 1994: 89

⁶³ Thackston 1993: 423

that we know of her is that she was a *Shia* and belonged to a respected family. We do not know much about Humayun's early life or education either. However Gulbadan Begum's *Ahval* prolifically tells us that he not only knew many languages but also had deep knowledge of astrology as well as astronomy; he was a patron of arts and letters and maintained a personal library. All these factors point out that Humayun was a learned monarch. While dealing with Humayun's life and times this fact must be born in mind that like his father Babur, Humayun has not left behind his memoirs to give us an insight into his life, so we have to depend upon the contemporary sources like Khvandamir, Gulbadan Begum⁶⁴, Bayazid Bayat, Jawahar and Abul Fazal from a later period. Although Gulbadan, Bayazid Bayat and Jawahar wrote in Akbar's time yet their accounts are valuable because they were first hand witnesses to many events in Emperor Humayun's life.

Like his father Babur Humayun too had a tumultuous life, the only major difference was that his stints of unsettled life were fewer and shorter than those of his father. He passed most of his life in exile⁶⁵ yet he was always recognized as the king and nothing less. In fact Humayun serves as the connecting link between the more unsettled, fluid world of Babur and the overtly ritualistic and symbolic monarchy of Akbar.

1.5.1 Humayun's Marriages

Humayun too did not restrict himself to the Quranic injunction of four wives. His wives were: Bega Begum; Hamida Banu Begum (mother of Akbar); Mah Chuchak Begum; Gunwar Bibi; Gulbarg Barlas; Mewajan; Shad Bibi and Shaham Aghah not to mention innumerable concubines and slave girls. Technically speaking this entourage of women (wives as well as concubines) cannot be called harem as like his father Babur, Humayun too had an unsettled life, wandering from place to place and from one country to another. Thus there was neither the time nor the convenience of organizing and institutionalizing harem into a cohesive unit. For most of the time Humayun had to live in camps and his women shared his lot⁶⁶ Though one major notable component of this period is Humayun's clear acceptance as the *padshah* which led to his clear distancing from his

⁶⁴ Lal 2005: 2

⁶⁵ Lal 2005: 20

⁶⁶ Nath 1994: 25

men, even in his wanderings he remains at the helm of affairs, ordering and instructing his men instead of mingling with them.

The episode of Humayun's marriage proposal being initially refused by Hamida Banu Begum makes for an interesting episode in Gulbadan's work. Gulbadan recounts in her *Ahval* that Humayun first had a glimpse of young Hamida, then nearly fourteen at his brother Hindal's place where she was a frequent visitor. On seeing her Humayun expressed his desire to marry her, he reportedly said to Dildar Begum, "Mir Baba Dost Ali is related to us. It is fitting that you should give me his daughter in marriage."⁶⁷ Hamida Banu was Hindal's teacher Mir Baba Dost Ali's daughter. When Humayun expressed his desire to marry her, Hindal objected to this offer as he considered her as his sister and thought that her marriage to the Emperor might cause embarrassment to the royal family.⁶⁸ Naturally angered Humayun left the place. Hindal's mother Dildar Begum settled the issue by chiding her son Hindal for his *improper behavior* and told Humayun in a written communication that he should not take such small matters seriously. Next day Dildar Begum threw a party, on Humayun's insistence when Hamida was called she reportedly refused to come.

Ultimately it was Dildar Begum who succeeded in convincing the initially reluctant Hamida Banu by saying, "After all you will marry someone; who could be a better choice than a king?"⁶⁹ To this Hamida reportedly said, "Indeed I shall marry someone someday; but he shall be one whose collar my hand can touch, not one the hem of whose skirt I cannot reach."⁷⁰ Thus it took Humayun nearly forty days to win Hamida Banu's heart. This particular incident has an underlying meaning to it that even in the male dominated Mughal society women had a say in accepting and denying marriage proposals, though rarely. Abul Fazal mentions the royal wedding in his monumental work the *Akbarnama* thus: "in the year 948 he (Humayun) brought Her Highness Maryam Makani, the sacred and noble lady, the glory of whose chastity and purity and the light of whose sovereignty and sainthood, show forth from her lustrous brow, into the bond of matrimony, with lordly ceremonies

⁶⁷ Beveridge 1994: 149-150

⁶⁸ Beveridge 1994: 149-150

⁶⁹ *Ibid*: 150-151

⁷⁰ Begum 1902: fol.43a-43b

and royal rites.”⁷¹ In fact It is quite interesting to note that in Humayun’s time the term harem comes to be used more frequently. However, other terms are also used to denote the same meaning.

1.5.1.1 Reverence for Mothers & other Senior Ladies

Like the first Mughal sovereign Babur his son and successor Humayun also paid deep respect to his elder female relations. Though he was more used to a life of ease and luxury still he often visited the senior ladies of his harem, so much so that it irked his wife Bega Begum. ⁷²Once she reportedly said to Humayun “Though for several days you have been visiting the garden but you haven’t come to our home even once. After all there are no thorns in the way to our home. For how long you will remain displeased with us?” Gulbadan Begum informs us in her *Ahval-i- Humayun Badshah* that after this pleading of his wife the sovereign asked for the other ladies to make exit and they obliged. When the ladies left he said to Bega Begum, ”Bibi, what ill treatment have I made to you that you complained of this morning? That was not the place to make such complaints and as all of you know that I have been to the quarters of elder ladies (*wali un ni matan*).It is my duty to make them happy. In fact I feel ashamed for not visiting them often. Since I am an opium eater if I get delayed in coming to you, do not be angry with me. Instead of complaining, write letter to me, saying, ”Whether you choose to come to us or not, we are happy and thankful to you.”⁷³

This conversation reminds us of a very similar interaction between Humayun’s mother (Maham Begum) and his father that took place a few years earlier. Thus it becomes exceedingly clear that senior women in the Mughal household exercised tremendous control over the younger men and women in the family including the emperor and even king’s wives could not challenge their status or role in the imperial harem. We further observe that while as Babur’s favorite wife Maham tried to change his routine but failed, as a mother to Humayun, she exercised great control over her son’s personal life.⁷⁴ Hence being a favorite to the master did bring laurels and privileges but being the mother or senior

⁷¹ Beveridge 1902: 364

⁷² Beveridge 1994: 130-131

⁷³ Beveridge 1994: 130-131

⁷⁴ Lal 2005: 63

female relation to the emperor carried greater value and authority. Being the mother of the emperor gave the mother in question an upper hand over other queens of the king. Hamida Banu became a widow at the young age of thirty but continued to play an active role in Emperor's private and public life till the very end of her life.

Akbar was born when Humayun was in wandering. Hamida Banu delivered the child at Amarkot, 100 miles away from Thatta. "This news gave immense pleasure to the king and his happiness knew no bounds. In that desert as he had nothing to celebrate and offer his *Amirs* and others as gifts, so he took saffron from Jauhar and distributed among his men saying as of now I have just this much. May the name and glory of this child spread like the delicious scent of this saffron?"⁷⁵ The importance of this birth is well known in history but in the context of the harem, we find the new mother Hamida Banu, getting greater importance in future. In the Mughal family mothers and specially those to the Emperor were always given importance, mothers of the first two Mughals- Qutlugh Nigar Khanum and Maham Begum were held in high esteem so was the case with Akbar's mother Hamida Banu Begum. As we have seen previously the women of Mughal family mostly gained ascendancy at advanced age. When the favorite wives became mothers to sovereign (Maham Begum and Hamida Begum) they became more celebrated.

Senior Women acting as Peace-makers

All through the history of the Mughals the Royal ladies had played a pivotal role in resolving family disputes and restoring peace and harmony between mutually warring factions of the imperial family. We have already come across various instances of senior royal women mediating in state affairs, brokering peace, advising and counseling the emperor on public and private matters during Babur's time. In the reign of Humayun their activism only increased. On many occasions was their advice sought and catered to settle disputes between Humayun and his brothers.⁷⁶ It is known that after Babur's death Humayun parceled the empire among his three brothers as per the Timurid custom however the struggle for power continued unabated. It won't be out of place to mention that the

⁷⁵ Ahmad 1927: 172

⁷⁶ Fazal 1902: 462,467-468

senior ladies of the Mughal household acted as peacemakers and tried to establish peace between the mutually hostile brothers. As already mentioned during his struggle for power with Humayun, his step-brother Kamran asked Dildar Begum to advise him on the future course of action he should pursue, who told him to seek Khanzadeh Begum's counsel on the matter as she was their elder kinswoman⁷⁷. When Kamran asked Khanzada Begum she said "as his Majesty Firdaus Makani (Babur) decided it and gave his throne to the Emperor Humayun, and as you, all of you have read the *khutba* in his name till now, so now regard him as your superior and remain in obedience to him."⁷⁸

The most notable thing about this incident is the positive role played by two senior Mughal ladies. That of counseling and easing out flaring tempers. Instead of taking sides and getting entangled in politics they rather focused on bringing truce between the warring brothers. Another incident that throws floods of light over the strong familial bonds in the early world of Mughal family took place soon after Mirza Hindal proclaimed himself the emperor and had the Khutba read in his name. He went to seek his mother Dildar Begum's advice. On this occasion the Mughal matriarch chose to wear a blue cloth over her breast. When Hindal asked her the cause of wearing that dress she reportedly said, "I am wearing mourning for you (*Kabud*); you are young and have from the instigation of irreflecting sedition-mongers, lost the true way; you have girded your loins for your destruction."⁷⁹. Hence we find that instead of rejoicing in her son's victory a mother chose to chastise him for deviating from the path of loyalty and service to the throne. Allegiance to the throne was all that mattered and the women played a vital part in enforcing the ideas of correct behavior among their sons, brothers and nephews.

1.6 The Chawsa Episode

The incident of Chawsa is very important from the point of view of the harem because it was for the first time in India that a Mughal Emperor lost his sacred harem to the enemy.

⁸⁰We are told that Mughals under Humayun were routed by Afghans led by Sher Shah at

⁷⁷ Beveridge 1994: 161

⁷⁸ Ibid: 161

⁷⁹ Fazal 1993: 339

⁸⁰ Lal 2005: 122

the battle of Chausa fought in 1539. Abbas Khan Serwani informs us that the Mughal army was so badly defeated that Humayun could not even gather his harem and he ran towards Agra. Thus he not only conceded defeat in this battle but failed as a husband and guardian to his female relations also. While Niyamatullah tells us that once Humayun smelled defeat at Chausa he left the security of his harem upon Khwaja Mausam and some trusted men and ran away to save his life. However, unfortunately it was already too late by the time Shah Mausam reached the royal camp as he found the Afghans engaged in arson and loot and before he could secure the imperial zenana he was killed. It was at this time that many royal Begums along with their maid servants fell to the Afghans. Chausa proved to be the first big loss since the Mughal occupation of India. Not only was it a big military loss but the prestige of Babur's descendants was put at stake too. The loss of harem put up a grave question mark on the credibility and strength of Mughals in India.

It is recorded in contemporary sources that four thousand women of Humayun's harem were captured after the battle of Chausa.⁸¹ However it is worth mentioning that while many royal ladies had committed suicide by drowning themselves in river few were killed by the Afghans during loot and many were lost without a trace. Gulbadan Begum informs us about some women who were lost in this war: Humayun's two wives Chand Bibi and Shad Bibi; Bega Begum's daughter Aqiqa; Sultan Hussain Bekara's daughter.⁸² One of Humayun's chief queens Bega Begum was captured and imprisoned in the Rohtasgarh fort along with many other women of Humayun's zenana who were set free later. What makes this incident all the more important from the point of view of harem inmates is the coming back of Bega Begum to the imperial household and being readily accepted?. Hence like in the times of Babur during his son's reign also no stigma was attached to women who were abdicated, lost or voluntarily surrendered to the enemy.

⁸¹ Lal 2005: 122

⁸² Lal 2005: 122

CHAPTER 2

AKBAR AND HIS HAREM

Akbar's Early Life and Career

Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar the third and the greatest Mughal was born at Amarkot to Humayun's wife Hamida Banu Begum.¹ He ascended to the throne of Hindustan in 1546 after the untimely death of his father. Aged only fourteen at that time he grew up to become a wise statesman, sagacious ruler, able military general who gave peace and stability to this ancient land and its people; established many new institutions while revitalized and improved upon the previous ones. Harem as a full-fledged institution falls under the latter category. As we have seen earlier the concept of harem though present in a rudimentary form during the reign of his two predecessors developed as a *sacred abode* only during the time of Akbar.² The Mughal histories project him as *Akbar the great*, his friend and chief chronicler Abul-I-Fazl going to the extent of ordaining him with divine powers *his* Akbar being omnipotent, bestowed with magical qualities of head and heart. He has recorded many such instances where the emperor's magical powers get displayed. The Mughal chroniclers have tried to create an aura around the persona of the emperor who was gifted with the loftiest virtues of nature and thus chosen by God for Kingship thus elevating his status to divinity. At one place in his Akbarnama Abul-I-Fazal has thus summed up the qualities of the emperor:

“Kingship is a gift of God, and is not bestowed till many thousand grand requisites have been gathered together in an individual....It is clear to the wise that a few among the holy qualities are, magnanimity, lofty benevolence, wide capacity, abundant endurance, exalted understanding, innate graciousness, natural courage, justice, rectitude, strenuous labour, proper conduct, profound thoughtfulness, laudable overlooking (of offences), and acceptance of excuses...Thanks be to God! The holy personality of the Shahinshah is a

¹ Eraly 1997: 68

² Fazal 2014: 421

fountain of perfect qualities, and a mine of holy principles...Give all that thou hast, and purchase eyes, and behold the world- adorning qualities of our spiritual and temporal king so that thou mayest know what is kingship, and what is the meaning of sovereignty!”³

The above statement makes it sufficiently clear that Akbar was the wisest of man, decorated with all the possible qualities both temporal and spiritual. Thus he was the chosen one. Everything about him was magical and divine. Another remarkable feature of the histories of Akbar’s time is the use of high sounding names and titles associated with the Mughal kings and other important members of the Mughal household.⁴ While Akbar himself was decorated with lofty names like *Hazrat Shahinshah*, *Khedive-I-jahan* (khedive of the age), *Gawhar-I yekta-I khilafat* (unique jewel of the caliphate), *khedive-I surat va mani* (spiritual and temporal khedive)⁵. His grandfather and first Mughal Babur was posthumously called *Giti-sitani-I Firdaws Makani* (conqueror of world residing in Paradise) while Babur’s son and Akbar’s father Humayun was called *Jahanbani Jannat-I Ashyani* (Guardian of the world whose Nest is paradise).⁶ Akbar’s mother Hamida Banu Begum is also known as *Maryam Makani* (the one dwelling with Mary) and the royal wives as *hazrat-i-sarapardeh-i-sultanat* (Veiled ones of the empire).

Thus we see an aura of chastity being created around the life of not only the emperor himself but those of the people associated with him also. Everything attached to his majesty had holiness and sanctity attached to it. Now be that his court (*darbar-i-maulla*)⁷ or his family (*dudaman-i-vala*). His harem was *Shabistan-i-Iqbal* (haram of fortune) and his women are known by different names like *pardeh giyan* (veiled ladies) and *Iffat-i- qubab* (cupola of chastity). All the recorded histories of that period help to construct this idea of a supreme sovereign who was the best creation of God and thus the chosen one for kingship, he could not do any wrong or wrong anybody because he was perfection incarnate. Not just Abul-I- Fazal’s Akbarnama and Ain-I- Akbari but other contemporary sources like Nizam al-Din Ahmad’s Tabaqat-i Akbari and Gulbadan Begum’s Ahval also

³ Fazal 2014: 421

⁴ Lal 2005: 144

⁵ Fazal 1993: 156

⁶ Lal 2005:145

⁷ Fazal 1993: 413

reinvigorate this theory of a benign monarch, free from all evil and folly chosen by God for the job because of his manifold qualities.

In this context it becomes easily understandable that everything around such a haloed figure automatically became sacred and venerable. All his relations and chiefly the ladies of his seraglio achieved greatness owing to meager entry into the harem of the third Mughal-the greatest of them all. One interesting point that besieges the mind here is that though the first two Mughals also maintained harems but the kind of sanctity and inviolability that came to be associated with it during Akbar's time⁸ is found missing in their time. Then what led to this shift in attitude? Of course as discussed earlier glorification and apparent divine status of Akbar was one cause of it but looking deeply into the matter we find that the *Rajput* influence upon him owing to his matrimonial alliance with the *Kachchwaha* princess of *Amber* was a major cause of this shift in attitude. We are aware of the Rajput obsession with female chastity and their equating it with family honor.

2.1 Morality of Akbar

Akbar's attitude towards sexuality was somewhat puritanical. Though he maintained a large fleet of women in his harem, he was against any kind of sexual excesses. As he was projected as the righteous king, his behavior was supposed to be trend-setting and unquestionably *clean* in all respects validating his super human status. The chronicles of his age deliberately stress moderation and restraint in terms of women and even food habits. *Badayuni* categorically refers to Akbar's abstinence from beef as a result of the company of the "rascally Hindus...and reverence to cow"⁹ At another place the same author comments that "in imitation of the usages of these Lamas", Akbar not just limited the time he spent in the harem, curtailed his food and drink but "especially abstained from meat"³ However Abul-I-Fazal hails Akbar's remarkable sexual control and relates the large number of his marriages to his desire to have able progeny rather than any kind of sexual over-indulgence. This kind of behavior on the Emperor's part evidently struck Badauni and even the Jesuit Priest father Monserrate whose disbelief is evident here:"Zelaldinus

⁸ Lal 2005: 178

⁹ Badauni 1990: 312

(Akbar) has more than 300 wives, dwelling in separate suites of rooms in a very large palace. Yet when the priests were at the court he had only three sons and two daughters.”¹⁰

We are informed in the *Ain* about the need of matrimony and the conjunctions binding on it:

“Every care bestowed upon this wonderful tie between men is a means of preserving the stability of the human race, and ensuring the progress of the world; it is a preventive against the outbreak of evil passions, and leads to the establishment of homes. Hence his Majesty, in as much as he is benign watches over great and small, and imbues men with his notions of the spiritual union and the equality of essence which he sees in marriage. He abhors marriages, which take place between man and woman before the age of puberty. They bring forth no fruit, and his Majesty thinks them even hurtful; for afterwards, when such a couple ripens into manhood, they dislike having connexion, and their home is desolate.”¹¹

Thus we find that the *Akbari* chronicles not only extol his Majesties controlled sexuality and the great merit he attached to reproductive aspect of marriage but also clearly delineate that he abhorred any kind of deviant sexual behavior be that homosexuality or adultery. We have on record such instances when the king dealt roughly with people engaged in such *vices*. As per one such famous incident mentioned in the *Akbarnama* one of imperial officers named Ali Quli Zaman had an affair with a camel driver’s son named Shaham Beg. When this came to the notice of Akbar he asked him to repent for his deeds and send the camel-driver’s son to Court.” This is in contrast to Babur’s infatuation for a Bazaar boy named Baburi.¹² Hence we see that within a matter of few decades great change had come in the thought process and morality of the Mughal ruling class.

Thus we see that any kind of sexual offence was anathema to the Emperor and he himself practiced very high standards of morality and behavior both public and private to set it as an example for his subjects to follow. Though his attitude was somewhat paradoxical as on one hand he held progressive views on women and their role in family and society while on the other his fetish for their reproductive role as the center point of a successful marriage

¹⁰ Monserrate 1922: 202

¹¹ Fazal 2014: 287

¹² Thackston 1993: 152

seem to ignore the physical and emotional strain of repeated labor pain and child birth. However it is worth mentioning that Akbar was ahead of his times in terms of conduct and liberal ideas, he introduced many reformatory measures like prohibiting pre-puberty marriages¹³, consent of both the parties i.e. bride and groom along with their respective parents was made binding, marriage between near relations was forbidden, polygamy was generally disapproved owing to both health reasons and financial constraints.¹⁴

Akbari mores of morality were very pristine and immaculate. Any kind of deviation from the general standard was unacceptable to him. We are told by Badauni that the prostitutes were asked to relinquish their quarters in the main city and settled in a place called *Shaitanpura* as a measure of correcting unregulated sexual practices.¹⁵ The chronicles erect a masculine image of the Emperor positioning him as a symbol of perfect manhood. His righteous behavior and omission of any name as his favorite wife hints at his controlled virility and ideal sexual / ethical behavior. This was a departure from the time of Babur when male-female love was celebrated and could readily find place in the Emperor's memoirs, Babur for that matter does not seem embarrassed of his liking for a *Bazaar* boy either and went to the extent of composing love poems for him.¹⁶ In Akbar's time where even love of opposite sexes was not discussed publicly, thinking of homosexual liaisons was considered base and bestial, an unpardonable offence and disease to the society. Paradoxically such liaisons were an open secret in the highest echelons of the Mughal society.

Once the monarch was catapulted to a high and exalted stature hitherto unknown in the annals of Mughals, it was the turn of the people and situations surrounding him. With his personal honor invested in their bodies his women naturally took precedence over all other. Now coming straight to the point of our present study i.e. the harem and the political and socio-cultural standing of its inmates we first of all look at the manifold matrimonial alliances of Akbar and the reasons involved in his building a mammoth harem which was a departure from the time of his father and grandfather who obviously did not restrict

¹³ Fazal 1994: 204

¹⁴ Nath 1994: 27

¹⁵ Badauni 1990: 311

¹⁶ Thackston 1993:152

themselves to the Islamic ruling of four wives at a time but had dwarf sized harems as compared to Akbar. Though there is no fixed number of wives that Akbar is credited with and different sources provide different numbers. While Abul-i-Fazal puts that at 5000; Father Monserrate talks of 300 wives and Henry Blochmann puts the number at sixty¹⁷ whatever be the exact figure it is a fact that Akbar had a large fleet of women in his seraglio. Divergent set of opinions have been propounded by Historians as the cause of these alliances, political aspect of these marriages is the most commonly cited reason. Besides this continuance of the Mughal line, emphasizing power and regality of the empire might have been the other reasons behind this endeavor. However, the chief one was of course the belief that Akbar was omnipotent one and just by marriage he was uplifting the women and their relations. Thus it was a symbol of a holy obligation rather than a sign of emperor's lust. As Abul-i-Fazal informs us in *Ain-i-Akbari* that His Majesty forms matrimonial alliances with princes of Hindustan, and of other countries; and secure by these ties of harmony the peace of the world."¹⁸

Akbar ascended to the throne of Hindustan as a consequence of his father's sudden and untimely demise.¹⁹ He was barely fourteen at that time. The nascent Mughal Empire was surrounded by enemies from all sides. Hence the responsibility on the teenage Emperor's shoulders was a formidable one. Undoubtedly during the initial phase of his reign he was ably assisted by old and loyal servants of the throne like Bairam Khan and *Maham Anagah* but Akbar's tactful use of matrimonial alliances as a tool to strengthen and enhance his rule played a pivotal role in furthering the Mughal cause. Forging of matrimonial alliances was an attempt at winning over political allies. We know that matrimonial alliances have been used for political cause in India and abroad since time immemorial thus there was nothing new about this policy but contracting marriages with Rajputs was a decidedly novel and bold initiative ahead of his times when religious bigotry and narrow mindedness were rule of the day. These marriages served the twin purpose of winning the Empire faithful allies like the Rajputs²⁰ as also firmly establishing Akbar as a tolerant and eclectic ruler.

¹⁷ Lal 1988: 26

¹⁸ Fazal 2014: 45

¹⁹ Srivastava 1952: 135

²⁰ Srivastava 1952: 149

By now we have come to know about the expanded web of Akbari marriages and consequently large number of wives at his disposal, it is interesting to note that these women were of different color, creed, ethnicity and even nationality it was not an easy task to manage such a heterodox set of elements under one roof with ease. Thus coupled with the Emperor's obsession for the chastity of the female body there arose the need to give the already existing harem an institutionalized form.²¹ In fact it developed as a full-fledged separate department that was dependent on the state exchequer like any other royal office.

Hence the first step towards understanding the harem as an institution lies in undertaking an in depth study of the architectural configuration of the harem during Akbar's reign. A closer look at the Akbari buildings like the Fatehpur Sikri complex, Agra Fort, Forts of Allahabad and Ajmer makes it abundantly clear that the harem complex was enclosed by high walls from all sides ensuring both privacy and security of its residents. It should be understood that the *Mahal* or seraglio formed only a part of the innumerable buildings that were housed inside the massive palace structure. A survey of the Agra fort tells us that it was planned like a city housing structures like the *Diwan-i-Am*, *Diwan-i-Khas*, imperial offices, guard dwellings among others, apartments of Royal ladies called Mahal lay in one part of the palace. Though *Ain* informs us that, "His Majesty has made a large enclosure with fine buildings inside, where he reposes. Though there are more than five thousand women, he has given to each a separate apartment."²²

However it is highly unlikely that even an all powerful sovereign like Akbar could have had five thousand wives to his credit, Beveridge's estimate of him having more than three hundred wives seem more accurate. Add to it concubines, slave girls and various other female relations of the Emperor and of course the wives of nobles and other 'chaste' women who occasionally came to meet the ladies of the harem and sometimes remained there for a whole month²³ and temporarily inhabited the *zenana* and the figure naturally comes to match Abul-i-Fazal's estimate. Again his claim that each lady was given a separate apartment to reside doesn't seem credible. As it was neither humanly possible nor

²¹ Nath 1994: 26

²² Fazal 2014: 46

²³ Ibid: 47

practically feasible to do so.²⁴

2.2 Foster Mothers

Foster mothers or Anaghas formed a very important part of Mughal domestic life. These women were intimately associated with the imperial family owing to their close proximity with Royal children. Akbar's court chronicler Abul Fazal gives a detailed list of his foster mothers or Anaghas like Jiji Anagah²⁵, wife of Shams-al-Din Muhammad who had loyally served Humayun by helping him climb the steep bank of river Ganga after his defeat by Sher Shah at Kannauj; Fakhrunnisa Begum wife of Nadim Koka; Daya Bhawal Humayun's special servant; Kuki Anagah wife of Togh Begi; Pija Jan Anagah mother of Zain Khan Koka. One important aspect of this list of wet nurses as contained in the Akbarnama is the absence of Maham Anagah's name. While Abul Fazal clearly mentions that she had served the Emperor (Akbar) from a very young age but her being his wet-nurse is nowhere mentioned.²⁶ Fazal 1902: 55 Beveridge notes that the reason of this omission could be the fact that perhaps Maham Anagah was not a wet- nurse herself rather she was the head of all other nurses. We have been told that the chief nurse of Akbar was Jiji Anagah. In fact we have on record the complaints of Maham Anagah and other nurses who went to the extent of accusing her of robbing them the chance to suckle the royal baby by indulging in witchcraft. Abul Fazal writes, "On an evening which was seized of the light of fortune's morn, Jiji Anaga-that cupola of chastity-was nursing the first fruit of the garden of holiness, and grieving over the opposition to her by that veil of chastity-Maham Anaga, and by many others. She was very sad because they had represented to his majesty *Jahanbani Jannat-ashyani* (Humayun) that Mir Ghaznavi's wife (i.e.herself) was practicing incantations so that his majesty, the prince of mankind, should not accept anyone's milk but her own."²⁷ Such instances point to the underlying tensions in the Mughal household where importance of senior female relations has already been explored but it's interesting to note that women who didn't belong to the yoke of the imperial family had limited opportunity of rising in precedence. Thus this sort of behavior on part of Akbar's nurses is understandable. The

²⁴ Lal 1988: 39

²⁵ Beveridge 1993:109-110

²⁶ Beveridge 1993:109-110

²⁷ Fazal 1993: 384

singular attention that Maham Anagah went on to attain during the early phase of Akbar's reign is peculiar in the sense that it signals the ascendancy of a woman who came from outside the royal family. We also know that when on 18th Ramazan, 950 (16 December 1543) Askari had captured little boy Akbar and taken him to Kandahar, he was accompanied by Jiji Anagah, Maham Anagah and Atka Khan. Askari reportedly made over the nursling of fortuneto his own wife Sultan Begum, who tended to the child with love and care.²⁸ Thus we see that during his formative years when Akbar was away from his parents he had his foster mothers as guardians. This naturally sowed seeds of deep affection and respect in the heart of the young boy and later rise of Maham Anagah and her kinsmen can be seen as a result of this. In fact Akbar held all his foster mothers in great esteem and their relatives were suitably rewarded for the services rendered to the empire.

Here we must add that the preceding information brings to light the complexities of the Mughal domestic life where the wife of a brother who was in opposition to his elder brother (monarch), tended for the son of the same brother. The respectable position of this lady Sultan Begum in the imperial harem after her husband's death bears testimony to the fact that familial ties always had the upper hand in the Mughal world. Ties of blood were so strong that dissension and discord could not weaken them and ultimately it was the love for family and kinsmen that won. Even after the death of men of Mughal family, women were respected and their children were cared for. This is evident in the behavior of puritan Aurangzeb too who waded through blood of his brothers to ascend the throne of Hindustan but the women and children of his deceased brothers were neither humiliated nor tortured, in fact inter-marriages took place between his brother's children and his own progeny.

2.3 Marriages of Akbar

Though the exact number of Akbar's marriages and wives their off is uncertain still this much can be said with conviction that he maintained a large harem. In fact what is most arresting about these marriages is the fact that emperor entered into matrimony with women from most diverse backgrounds. The most significant example of which was the marriage of Akbar with Rajput princesses, his first Rajput marriage was solemnized in 1562 with

²⁸ Ahmad 1927:174

Kachwaha chief Raja Bihari Mal's daughter. We come to know that Chagtai Khan a close confidant of Emperor Akbar had introduced Raja Bihari Mal to him along with his relatives. Of this meeting Abul Fazal records in Akbarnama "His Majesty (Akbar's) discerning glance read devotion and sincerity in the behavior of the Rajah and his relatives."²⁹ Akbar's chief chronicler mentions that Bihari Mal thought it prudent to strengthen this association by forging matrimonial alliance with the Mughal royal house. The offer was graciously accepted by Akbar, subsequently "Raja Bihari Mal made the arrangements for the marriage in the most admirable manner and brought his fortunate daughter to this station and placed her among the ladies of the harem."³⁰

Though neither this was Emperor's first marriage nor his last but decidedly marks a turning point in the history of Hindustan as it not only won him favors of brave and loyal Rajputs³¹ but also furthered the Akbari cause of giving a unifying character to the diversified people and cultures of this country. For his Rajput wives brought with them not only the political allegiance of their clan and kinsmen but their socio-religious ethos also. The intermingling of the two cultures gave way to a new cultural identity-The Indo-Islamic culture. Akbar's son and successor Jahangir born of Kachwaha princess *Harkha Bai* had half Hindu and half Muslim blood in his veins that corroborates this viewpoint. Later few more Hindu Rajput princesses entered Akbar's harem as his lawfully wedded wives: niece of Raja Kalyan Mal of Bikaner, daughter of Raja Har Rai of Jaisalmer, sister of Rana Uday Singh of Marwar, *Rajkumaris* of Merta¹ (marwar ri pargana ri vigat II,p.69-70) and Dungarpur³²

Few other notable wives of Akbar were: *Ruqaiyya Sultan Begum*, his first wife who was also the daughter of his uncle *Mirza Hindal*, this Begum was childless but owing to his love for her, Akbar had entrusted the guardianship of prince Salim to her. Another important name in this list is of *Salima Sultan Begum* who was the widow of Akbar's regent Bairam Khan, she was a granddaughter of Babur as well. She is known as a well read and sagacious lady, during prince Salim's revolt against his father Akbar this queen played pivotal role in bringing rapprochement between father and son. One of Akbar's other

²⁹ Fazal 1993: 242

³⁰ Ibid: 243

³¹ Prasad 1922: 2

³² Fazal 1993: 278,295

queens was the lovely wife of *Abdul Wasi*³³ who joined the imperial harem after her husband divorced her so that Emperor could marry her. Daughters of *Miran Mubarak Shah*, ruler of *Khandesh* and *Abdullah Khan Mughal* were also married to Emperor Akbar. However, this list is not exhaustive and Akbar had many other wives. Only the important ones have been mentioned here.

2.3.1 Akbar's Large Harem

While analyzing the marriages of Akbar it becomes pertinent to note that the status of his various wives was also not the same but differed significantly. While in the first line stood those wives who were related either to the sovereign through blood or those who were of exalted lineage or high pedigree. The second line was occupied by those ladies who were female relatives of either defeated native rulers or those men who out of their personal choice/ ambition wanted to become Emperor's relatives.³⁴

The very nature of mentioning the marriage alliances clearly highlights this difference in the status of the royal ladies. Abul-I-Fazal's mention of his master's first Rajput marriage makes this abundantly clear, so writes he, "The Rajah from right- thinking considered to make himself one of the distinguished ones of the court. In order to effect this purpose he thought of a special alliance(to) introduce his eldest daughter...among the attendants of the glorious pavilion...and brought his fortunate daughter to this station and placed her among the ladies of the harem."³⁵ In another instance "Rawal Har Rai of Jaisalmer was *desirous that his daughter might be exalted by being included among his (Akbar) female servants....As H.M.'s habit was to grant the requests of the needy..he accepted the petition....and that holy and happy-starred lady obtained eternal glory by entering the female apartments.*"³⁶ Likewise "Rai Kalyan Mal of Bikaner petitioned to Akbar through his sources and expressed his desire for the marriage of his daughter with the emperor which was accepted by Akbar."³⁷ An important feature of this type of marriages was that Emperor would send his envoy or some trusted person to fetch the lady instead of going in person. For instance Itimad Khan his

³³ Badauni 1972: 61

³⁴ Nath 1994: 41

³⁵ Fazal 1993: 242-43

³⁶ Ibid: 518-19

³⁷ ibid:518

trusted eunuch was sent to procure Miran Shah's daughter from Khandesh. While Rajah Bhagwant Das was sent to fetch Rawal Har Rai's daughter.

Though officially no such nomenclature as chief wife or secondary wife is used in the official histories of the period but the very language used to describe such relationships underlines the inferior status of these *secondary wives*.³⁸ Such kind of language is not used while mentioning the alliances with queens like Ruqaiyya Sultan Begum or Salima Sultan Begum. However the Rajput princesses enjoyed a considerably high status even as secondary wives. No distinction was kept between the children born from ladies of first rank, second rank, or even concubines. In fact the two succeeding Emperors after Akbar were born of Hindu Rajput mothers. Hence it becomes clear that issues like racial superiority or purity of blood did not affect succession issue and no bigotry was harnessed against off springs born of such union. Besides the first two categories of women in his harem Akbar like his predecessors had many concubines. In fact concubinage was in common practice among the Mughal royalty and nobility.³⁹ Akbar's sons Daniyal and Murad were born from concubines so were his daughters Shahzada Khanum, Shahr-un-nisa Begum and Aram Banu Begum⁴⁰ As in the case of children born from primary and secondary wives, no real distinction was made between children born from concubines also. However there always existed difference between a wife and a concubine.

However these concubines who were variously called *Kaniz*, *Sarar* and *Paristar* sometimes endeared themselves to the master more than the legal wives owing to their charm and vivacity.⁴¹ While fidelity was always expected out of wives, these concubines were more free in their conduct. They were not bound by any such precondition. However, we have instances of faithful concubines also who chose to live with the memory of their deceased master instead of switching to a new paramour. All said and done these concubines or *free born wives* had a special place in the Mughal world. From the beginning of the Mughal dynasty till its very end these ladies continued to hold a prominent place in the Mughal world.

³⁸ Sarkar 1964: 334

³⁹ Fazal 1993: 372

⁴⁰ Jahangir 1989: 34

⁴¹ Terry 1655: 286-87

Last in the line of female associates of Emperor who were somewhat sexually attached to him were *Kanchanis* (dancers / entertainers) and *Bandis* (servants). In fact so adapt were these dancing / singing girls in their trade that the Royal ladies possessed their own band of entertainers.⁴² Among these entertainers various other artists like *bahurupiyas* (mimics) *jadugars* (magicians) and *Nats* (acrobats). On the last level of harem establishment existed *bandis* (maid-servants) variously called *paristar* and *khawas*. However, their chief duty remained to serve the master and his mistresses along with other inmates of the harem. Nevertheless, we cannot deny the fact that they provided pleasure and enjoyment to the master because being maid-servants didn't mean to be poorly dressed or plain-looking at least their names don't suggest so. With names as attractive as *Nargis* (Tulip), *Kesar* (Saffron), *Gul-Anar* (Pomegranate bud), *Gulrang* (Flower colored), *Mrig Nain* (Gazelle eyed), *Kishmish* (Raisin) and *Moti* (Pearl),⁴³ these ladies could not have been wanting in personal attainments. In a place like harem where the sovereign was the only visible male presence these beautiful women couldn't have escaped his eyes.

Thus large number of women in the harem was equivalent to King's power and his virility. Akbar's large sized harem was no exception to it but in this case there lay the King's desire to establish himself as the protector and benefactor of all his subjects irrespective of race, color, creed, or religion. His marriages with Hindu Rajput princesses were a novel experiment in this regard. We must keep in mind that the latent objective of these diversified alliances was to bring the entire universe under his protection and also to keep close watch over the farthest lands and the most diversified people. Another interesting point worth considering here is that what prompted the high souled and proud Rajputs to forge such alliances. For we know by all accounts that such alliances were not thrust upon them. In fact the Rajput Rajas were themselves desirous of such relationships.⁴⁴ Be that Bhar Mal of Amber, Har Rai of Jaisalmer or Rai Kalyan Mal of Bikaner among many others. In fact to justify such marriages Mughals were involved in the Kshatriya fold. Norman Ziegler points out in this regard that "the Muslim was also included within the hierarchical scheme as a Rajput... The Muslim Emperor in particular, held position of high

⁴² Thevnot 1949: 71

⁴³ Manucci 1906: 336-38

⁴⁴ Nath 1994: 41 2 Ziegler 1978:263

rank and esteem, and the traditions often equate him with Ram, the pre-eminent Kshatriya cultural hero of Hindu Rajput.”

Thus the dynamics of Akbar’s marriages into Rajput families and their subsequent loyalty and allegiance to the Mughal throne can be understood in two contexts: Firstly the political motives involved in forging such alliances and results thereof and secondly more personal socio-cultural implications of such relationships and far reaching effects that they had in the history of this country. While considering the first element i.e. the political motives and implications of such alliances we should understand that what was going in the mind of those Rajputs who entered into such alliances with the Mughal family. The desire of cementing ties with Akbar and gaining power and prestige was no doubt the basic one. As the relatives of the ladies married into the Mughal family were raised to high honors and position. However, we cannot deny that the role of Rajput loyalty and bravery was no less responsible for endearing them to the Emperor. Looking closely at the marriage of Akbar with Bharmal’s daughter⁴⁵ variously called Harka Bai, Manmati Bai and Jodha Bai later styled *Mariyam-uz-Zamani* (Mary of the Age) born of his Solankini Rani Chandravati marked a new epoch in Akbar’s policy of religious toleration or *Sulh-i-Kul*.

This wedding was celebrated in 1562 at Sambhar. Akbar was barely twenty at that time. As a consequence of this marriage Bharmal not only found a high office at the imperial court but the title of Raja was conferred upon him by Akbar. In fact later his son Bhagwan Das and grandson Man Singh went on to serve the Mughal Empire. Thus we see that Akbar’s first marriage with a Rajputni not only elevated the status of her kinsmen but secured the reins of power to them besides enriching them manifold as they too had their share in the wealth generated out of Mughal victories. The family ties were strengthened with the marriage of Man Singh’s sister Man Bai’s with prince Salim (Jahangir)⁴⁶

Thus the association of house of Amber with the Mughals seems to be an all-profitable one without any problems, but was it really so? As the contemporary sources inform us almost the whole of Rajputana had bowed down before Mughal might except Mewar under its valiant son Pratap. It would not be out of place to mention that the Maharana never forgave

⁴⁵ Nath 1994: 41-42

⁴⁶ Ibid:44.

Kachwahas for giving their daughters in marriage to the Mughals. In fact according to one popular narration once when Man Singh sought an interview with the Lord of Mewar, he refused to meet him because he considered it beyond his dignity to share bread with the one who had dined with the Mughals. Man Singh reportedly declared to avenge this humiliation. The result was the battle of Haldighati. We should not forget that as a rule no Sisodia girl was ever given in marriage to the Mughals. In fact for quite a long time no daughter of royal house of Marwar was married into the Kachwaha clan as a mark of protest.⁴⁷

As far as Akbar's motive behind such marriages is considered it was to establish himself as the Lord of all his subjects irrespective of creed, race, or religion. However, political motive in cementing such ties was all the more important. We must not forget that this was the time when Akbar had come out of Bairam Khan's tutelage and was trying to assert himself as an independent ruler.⁴⁸ As of now he neither had made any territorial advances nor had acquired the larger than life status that became synonymous with him during the later phase of his reign. However, he was the reigning sovereign of Hindustan but the ground beneath his feet was still shaky. Thus matrimonial alliances with Rajputs⁴⁹ not only helped him win political allies but won the Mughal throne a long and unbroken line of loyal and valorous military generals and statesmen who remained a strong and committed pillar of Empire almost till the very end.⁵⁰

2.3.1.1 Akbar's Preying Eye

Akbar maintained a large fleet of women in his harem.⁵¹ Abul-I-Fazal lists seven of his wives, through *nikah* marriage. Not to mention the innumerable number of women that entered his harem through *mutah* form of marriage which was neither permanent nor legal. As a young man Akbar hardly cared for his marital excesses but as he grew in age and stature, it became necessary on his part to justify the swelling number of women in his

⁴⁷ Bhattacharya 1998: 393,395

⁴⁸ Srivastava 1952: 147

⁴⁹ Ibid:166

⁵⁰ Lal 2005: 169

⁵¹ Lal 1988: 25

seraglio. He then turned to *Ulema* for help and guidance who on their part served him right by allowing him to have as many mutah wives as he pleased. Akbar's insatiable sexual appetite during his youth is well known. Badauni notes that "Qawwals and eunuchs were sent into the harems for the purpose of selecting daughters of the nobles, and of investigating their condition. And a great terror fell upon the city"⁵² In the same context Badauni mentions elsewhere that Akbar's weakness for young and beautiful women continued unabated for quiet sometime and even while living in the hermitage of Sheikh Salim Chishti he couldn't stop himself from casting his eyes on the ladies of the revered saint's household. Sons and nephews of the Sufi saint even complained to him. Badauni's apt remark on this incident deserves mention here:

*" Either make no friendship with an Elephant driver, Or make a house fit for an Elephant "*⁵³

Here the case of Abdul Wasi's beautiful wife cannot be lost sight of, upon whom fell the much married Emperor's roving eye what makes this case peculiar is the fact that she was divorced by her husband to further the cause of emperor's marriage to her. Notifying this event in his *Muntakhab*, Badauni writes, "...Now this woman, whose husband was still living, was wonderfully beautiful...One day it chanced that the eyes of the Emperor fell upon her, and so he sent to the sheikh a proposal of union, and held out hopes to the husband. For it is the law of the Moghul Emperors that, if the Emperor cast his eye with desire on any woman, the husband is bound to divorce her."⁵⁴ What makes this case all the more important is the fact that even married women were not excused from the King's lustful gaze. As per the Mughal tradition Abdul Wasi had to divorce his wife so that she could be removed to the Emperor's harem.

During the heydays of his youth Akbar did not pass his days engaged in constant warfare subjugating new lands and people or listening to religious debates and discussions in the *Ibadatkhana*. He enjoyed life amidst discharging his imperial duties far more intently, for he was still to tame his carnal passions. We are told by the contemporary sources like Badauni that Akbar had a flair for pretty lasses. He used to collect them as prized

⁵² Badauni 1972: 59

⁵³ Badauni 1972: 59

⁵⁴ Ibid: 59

possessions during his early years. The organization of *Khushroz*⁵⁵ or fancy bazaar was one such occasion to meet and spend time with fair maidens of his realm. In these bazaars women of Padshah's harem as well as choicest beauties from his realm participated. However, no other man except the Emperor was allowed to attend these fancy markets, for men separate bazaars were held. His voracious sexual appetite was satiated by the time he entered middle age. Akbar even issued strict regulations regarding marriage.⁵⁶ Although his longing for territorial expansionism continued almost till the very end, he became more tolerant, and more spiritual, artistically and culturally inclined. From *Ain-I-Akbari* we can get a glimpse of his idea of happy marriage:

“He (Akbar) abhors marriages which take place between man and woman before the age of puberty. They bring forth no fruit....His Majesty maintains that the consent of the bride and the bridegroom, and the permission of the parents, are absolutely necessary in marriage contract. His Majesty disapproves of high dowries. *Nor does His Majesty approve of every one marrying more than one wife*; for this ruins a man's health, and disturbs the peace of home. He *censures old women that take young husbands*, and says that doing so is against all modesty.”⁵⁷

It needs to be made clear that these notions of Akbar were perhaps born out of his own experiences. As the contemporary sources inform us that due to his sexual excesses Akbar had lost his vitality early and it caused him health related problems also. Another important fact is that his wife Salima Sultan Begum⁵⁸, widow of Bairam Khan was older than him. We can't say with certainty if Akbar's dislike for marriage with older women had something to do with his marriage to Salima Begum or not. However, we certainly know that these regulations came from Akbar when he was well into his middle age.

2.4 Akbar's Progeny

Marriages were meant to produce children of noble pedigree, the concept of more the merrier was naturally accepted in those times of incessant warfare and high mortality when

⁵⁵ Lal 1988: 165

⁵⁶ Fazal 1993: 287

⁵⁷ Fazal 1993: 287,288

⁵⁸ Lal 1988: 26

human life was not as precious as it is today. Giving the Emperor his first son was a great achievement for his wives. Two successive Rajput princesses succeeded in accomplishing this feat. Like her aunt Mariyam-Uz-Zamani, who gave Akbar his first son Salim, Manbai too gave Jahangir his first son Khusrav⁵⁹. However, before the birth of his son Salim, Akbar had spent many sleepless nights praying for the birth of an heir to the throne, thus securing his lineage. Contemporary chronicles inform us that Akbar had his first wife at the age of fifteen. She was Ruqaiyya Begum, a childless lady who tended to Akbar's grandson Khurram (Shahjahan). We must not forget that many of Emperor's children died in infancy. He then went on a pilgrimage to the tomb of Sheikh Muinuddin Chishti of Ajmer to seek the *Dervishe's* blessings for an heir.⁶⁰

Later with the blessings of Muinuddin Chishti's disciple and famous saint of Agra Sheikh Salim Chishti a son was born to Akbar named Salim (Jahangir) named after the *sufi* saint. In fact Akbar had sent his pregnant Rajput wife to Sheikh's hermitage for child birth to secure divine grace and blessings. Thus in 1569 the much desired heir to the Mughal throne was born⁶¹. After his birth many more children were born to him in quick succession: two sons Murad, Daniyal and three daughters.⁶² In fact Akbar was only thirty when his third son Daniyal was born to him, relieving him of the stress of producing potential heir to the throne. Perhaps this was the time when the change in Akbar the man started taking place. By all standards Salim's birth was the most lavishly celebrated affair. For he was not only a *son* but Akbar's first surviving child as well. 59 Nath 1994:29

Beautiful verses were composed celebrating the birth of the "pearl of the casket of auspiciousness"⁶³:

"God be praised for the glory of the King

A splendid pearl came ashore from the ocean of justice

A star appeared from the zenith of glory and beauty

⁵⁹ Nath 1994: 29

⁶⁰ Srivastava 1952: 258

⁶¹ Srivastava 1952: 258

⁶² Eraly 1997: 171,172

⁶³ Fazal 1993:507

That nursling of the soul's desire of the King fruited
The just and perfect Muhammad Akbar,
Lord of Conjunction Perfect in wisdom, the most just of kings,
May our King be permanent and also the Prince
For countless days and unnumberd ''

Khawaja Husain of Merv⁶⁴

Another noteworthy feature of Mughal family was the natural importance given to sons over daughters. Though once born they were loved and cared for but the desire was to have as many sons as possible who were potential heirs to the imperial throne. Babur and Humayun fathered both sons and daughters and on coming of age, married them off to suitable mates. Akbar on his part had three daughters: Shahzada Khanum, Shahr-un-nisa Begum and Aram Banu Begum⁶⁵ all mothered by various concubines of the Emperor. Out of them Akbar is said to have been very fond of his youngest daughter Aram Banu, who was known for her temper.⁶⁶ We can gauge this differential treatment meted out to Mughal daughters from the chronicles of that time that describe these births and ensuing celebrations in detail. We can also notice that while Akbar, the father is being glorified, name of the child's mother is not directly mentioned anywhere in the

Akbari chronicle⁶⁷. Thus even while fulfilling their reproductive duties, central to the furthering and strengthening of the Empire, the women remain unnamed contributors in the annals of Mughals. This paradigm shift in attitude towards women is a peculiar Akbari trait.

2.5 A Unique Women's Enterprise: Gulbadan Begum's Hajj

All the contemporary sources are unanimous about the centrality of Akbar's regime with all the powers of Empire concentrated in his hands. Though the women in Akbari

⁶⁴ Badauni 1972: 124-125

⁶⁵ Jahangir 1999: 34

⁶⁶ Early 1997: 172

⁶⁷ Lal 2005: 183

chronicles seem either sidelined or obscured yet it has to be remembered that they were very much a part of the Mughal establishment and passively they played a very prominent role at both the domestic as well as state front. The senior ladies of the Empire (Mother, step-mothers, foster-mothers, aunts, sisters, and wives) were always on the forefront of domestic affairs. One particular incident of Akbar's regime that draws our attention towards the power wielded by the ladies of *zenana* is the *hajj*⁶⁸ undertaken by Akbar's aunt Gulbadan Begum along with other ladies of his harem. Though it was a purely religious enterprise still such bold initiative on the part of ladies secluded in the harem was not a lesser deal. Abul-I-Fazal informs us "That veil of chastity Gulbadan Begum the paternal aunt of H.M. the Shahinshah had long ago made a vow to visit the holy places, but on account of the insecurity of the ways, and of the affairs of the world, she had not been able to accomplish her intention."⁶⁹

Few notable observations regarding the members of Hajj party need mention here. Firstly no wife of Akbar was a part of this enterprise except Salima Sultan Begum who was a few years his senior. Perhaps because the young wives needed more protection. Secondly the importance of senior members of the Mughal household becomes clear once again as the only two comparatively young women in the Royal entourage were Umm Kulsum Khanum and Salima Khanam. This imperial retinue proceeded for Hajj on 8/9 October

1575 guarded and followed by many men who had been properly proportioned for this enterprise. An important fact that needs to be mentioned here is the undisputed male superiority over women in Mughal context. For we know that "nosegay of fortune Prince Sultan Murad" accompanied the ladies upto the shore of southern ocean.⁷⁰ Thus a young boy of six was considered worthy enough of providing protection to the aged matriarchs of the royal family. Clearly signaling the "gender issue" where a young boy stood a station higher than the most senior female members of the Royal family. However on Gulbadan Begum's request "the new fruit of the Caliphate" was spared the strains of such a long and arduous journey and by H.M.'s orders Baqi Khan, Rumi Khan, Abdur Rahman Beg and

⁶⁸ Fazal 1993: 205

⁶⁹ Ibid: 205

⁷⁰ Fazal 1993: 205

some other vigilant servants of the court were sent along with her."⁷¹

After a sojourn of three and a half years at Mecca, the hajj party returned to Hindustan marked by joyous celebrations. Thus the Hajj pilgrim of Gulbadan Begam and her party becomes extra special because never in the entire history of the Mughal empire in India any such enterprise was undertaken before or after this incident. Though women kept going as pilgrims to Mecca as individuals but the grand and collaborative effort of this kind was never found repeating again. Thus Gulbadan Begam's Hajj pilgrimage along with other female members of imperial family is a pointer towards the rare though strong feminist presence in the Mughal domestic world.⁷² This sojourn cannot be dismissed as *any other* tour of Royal women because it not only hints at the decision-making power of the harem inmates in the otherwise male-centric Mughal domestic sphere but also towards their strong will and determination in undertaking such a long and perilous journey.

2.6 Veneration for Mother and other senior ladies

The Mughal practice of respecting one's mother and other senior female relations was inherited by Akbar from his predecessors. We know that how *his father and grandfather used to treat the senior ladies of their family in high esteem*.⁷³ Akbar was not only respectful of his mother but treated his step-mothers, foster-mothers, aunts and sisters in similar manner. We know of his deep attachment for one of his step-mothers Haji Begum. After Humayun's death this lady chose to spend rest of her life near the tomb of her husband in Delhi. Abul-I-Fazal records the high regard that Akbar had for her. He reportedly told Abul-I-Fazal about his unbounded regard for the old lady "The kindness and affection which she showed to me, and my love for her are beyond expression. Everyone who did not know the facts thought that she was my mother."⁷⁴

The Mughal annals are replete with numerous such incidents when the senior ladies of the harems intervened in both matters of public policy and private affairs of the household to bring peace and end turmoil in the imperial family. For such acts of sagacity the Mughal house shall always remain indebted to its women who counseled, pacified, strategized whenever the need arose. At one place we are informed that Khwajagi Fath Ullah who was

⁷¹ Ibid: 206

⁷² Lal 2005: 212

⁷³ Lal 1988: 23

once a dear servant of the Emperor, kept evil company and went astray. He went to Hajj without seeking H.M.'s (Akbar's) permission. However, on realizing his wrong-doing "he reposed for a while in the shelter of the chaste ladies, who were returning from the Hijaz. Now by their intercession he was pardoned, and laid hold of the skirt of daily-increasing fortune."⁷⁵ Infact we can't forget the valuable role played by the ladies of the imperial harem in bringing rapprochement between Akbar and his rebel son Salim.

CHAPTER 3

JAHANGIR AND HIS HAREM

Early Life of Jahangir

On August 30, 1569¹ was born Muhammad Sultan Salim the son and successor to Emperor Akbar and Rajput Princess *Mariyam-uz-Zamani*. He was named after Sufi saint Sheikh Muinuddin Chishti in whose hermitage he was born at Fatehpur Sikri. Before his birth many children of Akbar had died in infancy-A daughter named Fatima Banu Begum died in infancy while in 1564 were born twin sons named Hasan and Hussain but unfortunately they also died within two months of their birth.² These mishaps had tormented Akbar terribly and he fervently wished for an heir. He repeatedly visited the tomb of holy Sufi saint Sheikh Muinuddin Chishti at Ajmer and avowed to make a journey to the holy shrine once his desire for a son was fulfilled. Thus the birth of Salim gave much joy and relief to Akbar as the proverbial heir to the Mughal throne was born.

However, two more sons and daughters were born to Akbar in quick succession-Shahzada Khanum in November of 1569; Prince Murad in 1570; Daniyal in 1572; Shakrunnisa Begum and Aram Banu Begum. Though Akbar was fond of all his children Salim remained his favorite child whom he would fondly call *Sheikhu Baba*. To this effect Jahangir even writes in his memoirs, "I never heard my father, whether in his cups or in his sober moments call me Muhammad Salim or Sultan Salim, but always Sheikhu Baba."³ This Royal birth marked joyous celebrations though the father could not see the child immediately after his birth owing to the superstition of not seeing a long desired child. Alms were generously given, prisoners were set free and food was distributed to mark the happy occasion. The royal baby was entrusted to the care of Sheikh Salim Chishti's daughter, mother of Jahangir's foster brother Qutubuddin (Khubu). Akbar undertook the promised pilgrimage to Ajmer on foot and within 15 days covering a distance of 228 miles

¹ Prasad 1922: 1

² Fazal 1993: 356-57

³ Jahangir 1989: 1.2

reached Ajmer. On February 5, 1970 he paid homage at the *Dargah* of Sheikh Muinuddin Chishti.⁴

Akbar's decision to Shift the capital from *unlucky* Agra to Fatehpur Sikri started taking shape now. Raised both as a symbol of his sovereignty and gratitude of a thankful heart the city of Fatehpur Sikri stood by and large complete in 1574. However despite its opulence and grandeur it was deserted owing to an accident of 1582 when the dam constructed on the artificial lake burst out threatening the lives of Princes. Hence 1585 saw the complete desertion of this fort- city. However, in its happier days this was the place where Salim spent his childhood. As per the Muslim tradition Salim was circumcised along with his two brothers on October 22, 1573 and soon began his education. Tutored by the likes of Maulana Mir Kalan Haravi who incidentally was his first teacher; Qutbuddin Khan and last but not the least Abdur Rahim, son of Bairam Khan.⁵ From them he learnt good deal of Persian and Turkish languages and a smattering of Hindi. Besides inculcating in Salim a fine literary taste this education sowed in him the seeds of aesthetics also. His later love and appreciation for the art of painting could owe its origin to this early period of his life.

Nonetheless Salim inherited a robust and healthy frame from his parents. The Mughal-Rajput blood infused in him the vigor that helped him survive the hardships of life and subdue the damage done to his constitution due to his early addiction to alcohol and drugs. Fond of martial arts, sports and hunting Salim evolved into a young, promising, and energetic youth full of capability. Not just his father but also all the harem ladies were equally fond of him. To them he could do no wrong and this pampered childhood, addiction to alcohol coupled with early introduction to a life of luxury and sloth turned him into an angry, haughty, and sensuous youth given to the pleasures of wine and women. It is not that his predecessors were teetotalers. Both Babur and Humayun liberally indulged in wine. Even Akbar loved drinking in his youth and sometimes over-indulged.⁶ Jahangir's younger brothers Murad and Daniyal had succumbed to heavy drinking. As a matter of fact Jahangir had never tasted wine except in medicinal form till the seventeenth year of his life.

⁴ Jahangir 1989: 510-11

⁵ Fazal 1993: 334-39

⁶ Fazal 1993: 43-44

However once initiated his taste for drink reached such a pass that he confesses his addiction in Tuzuk,”(By 1594) my potions rose to twenty cups of doubly distilled spirits, fourteen during the daytime and the remainder at night.”⁷.In fact it was only when Hakim Humam told him about his worsened condition that he decreased his daily intake of alcohol. Anyhow the vice brought much misery and pain to Jahangir during his last years.

3.1 Jahangir’s Harem

Jahangir was sensuous by nature⁸ and he had no qualms about it either. Known for a roving eye women were his principle source of interest all through his life. Like all other Mughals he too was master of a polygamous household. While his marriage with Nurjahan has become a subject of legends, she decidedly was not his only love. Salim was married for the first time at the early age of sixteen years with his cousin Manbai, daughter of Raja Bhagwan Das of Amber. The lady in question gave him a daughter named Sultan-un-Nisa Begum and a son named Khusrau, on whose birth she was elevated to the rank of *Shah Begum* ⁹ Salim went on to marry many more women in the years to come. His last marriage was solemnized in 1611 with Meherunnisa (Nurjahan).Jahangir like his father had many Hindu wives in his harem. His wife Jagat Gosain, daughter of Mota Raja Udai Singh of Udaipur to whom he was married in 1586 gave him the heir to the Mughal throne Khurram (Shahjahan).During the next ten years Jahangir took sixteen more wives.

Names of few of his wives are as follows: daughter of Rai Singh of Bikaner; daughter of Said Khan Gakhar; Sahib-i-Jamal, daughter of Khwaja Hasan; Malika-i-Jahan, daughter of Raja Kalyan Mal of Jaisalmer; Nurunnisa Begum, sister of Muzaffar Hussain; Karamsi, daughter of Raja Keshav Dev; a daughter of ruler of little Tibet; two daughters of Mubarak Chak and Husain Chak of Kashmir; daughter of ruler of Khandesh; daughter of Khwaja Jahan; daughter of Mirza Sarjar.¹⁰ Even after his accession to the throne Jahangir, a much married man who had become a father and grandfather by now kept taking women into his harem. His last wife was the renowned Nurjahan with whom his marriage was solemnized

⁷ Jahangir 1989: 307-9.

⁸ Nath 1994: 29

⁹ Ahmad 1927: 456

¹⁰ Prasad 1922: 31-32

in 1611.

Hawkins credits Jahangir with 300 wives¹¹ while Terry takes the tally to full thousand¹². Anyhow these various marriages of the Emperor brought forth many progeny. Sahib-i-Jamal gave birth to Prince Parvez in 1589 and Karamsi bore a daughter named Bihar Banu Begum in 1590. January 5, 1592 witnessed the birth of Khurram from Jodhpur Princess Jagat Gosain. 1605 saw the birth of two more sons of Jahangir named Jahandar and Shaharyar nicknamed *nashudani*, both were born to concubines. While every royal birth was an occasion for grand celebration but that of Khurram (Joyous) was marked by exceptional splendor and gaiety. He was the favorite grandchild of Akbar and entrusted to the care of his childless wife Ruqaiyya Sultan Begum. Of all the children of Jahangir only Khurram could survive to a ripe old age. Three of his sons predeceased him while Shaharyar too was executed at the orders of Khurram soon after his accession.¹³ We don't really know that what kind of family life Jahangir lead? However, we can't call him a devoted husband or loving father in the modern sense given there was no such concept as family life in the medieval times. Men married several women owing to two reasons: to take political advantage and for the sake of love or lust and once that were satisfied they would move to the next one. Hence to think of conjugal fidelity in such times won't be more than a farce.

As far as Jahangir's love life is considered his adoration for Nurjahan is beyond any doubt and she was the true love of his matured years.¹⁴ However we don't find any historical evidence vis- à-vis Jahangir's affection for any of his wives except for Manbai or Shah Begum whose death he seems to have mourned deeply or at least this is what he makes us believe when he writes in his memoirs:

“What shall I write of her excellences and goodness? She had perfect intelligence and her devotion to me was such that she would have sacrificed a thousand sons and brothers for a single hair of mine....in consequence of her death, from the attachment I had for her, I passed some days without any kind of pleasure in life or existence, and for four days..I took

¹¹ Hawkins 1877: 421

¹² Terry 1655: 405-06

¹³ Fazal 1993: 324

¹⁴ Nath 1994:34

nothing in the shape of food or drink.”¹⁵

Besides Nurjahan and Manbai we know of Jahangir’s fondness for *Anarkali*, a dancing girl in his father Akbar’s harem. The unfortunate lady couldn’t get to live long and hence the romance had a short life as well. Anyhow this incident forms an important part of Jahangir’s life and before moving further it’s thus pertinent to discuss this episode of his life.

3.1.1 Anarkali

Anarkali (Pomegranate bud) was a handsome dancing girl in the Harem of Akbar.¹⁶ Her real name was Sharf-un-Nisa. Once while seated in his hall of mirrors at Lahore with Anarkali attending to him, Akbar saw her exchanging smiles with Prince Salim. He was so greatly enraged at this sight that he ordered the girl to be buried in the wall to die. While many consider the ensuing rivalry between father and son as the purported reason of Akbar’s atrocious decision. Many others hold Jahangir’s failed romances with Meherunnisa and Anarkali responsible for his revolt against his father. This was about the same time when the relations between father and son had turned sour to the extent that Akbar even felt suspicious of being poisoned by his son. It all began in 1591 when Akbar fell ill of colic and in a semi-conscious state accused his son to have administered him poison through the royal physician, Hakim Humam. Going by Badauni’s account the supposed statement of Akbar was thus:

“Baba Shaikhuji, since all this Sultanate will devolve upon thee,

Why Hast thou made this attack on me?

To take away my life there was no need of injustice,

I would have given it to thee if thou hadst asked me”.¹⁷

In any case coming back to the Anarkali episode the Prince was deeply shattered by the

¹⁵ Jahangir 1989: 55-56

¹⁶ Nath 1994:35

¹⁷ Badauni 1986:390

death of his beloved and after his enthronement a tomb was raised over her grave in Lahore in 1615.¹⁸ On the sides of this structure we find the following Persian inscription:

“ Ta Qiyamat shukr goyam kardgar-i-khwesh ra

Ah gar man baz binam-ru-i-yar-i-khwesh ra”

The English translation of the same reads as follows:

“Ah could I ever behold the face of my beloved once more,

I would thank my God until the day of resurrection.”¹⁹

While on the other side is written the composer’s name: Majnu Salim Akbar which means “your lover Salim, son of Akbar.” It thus leaves no doubt that Salim deeply loved this lady and was saddened by her demise.²⁰ This tragic romance brings forth two essential elements of Mughal history: one a woman could well become a reason for strife between a father and a son and two even a liberal and large hearted monarch like Akbar had not risen above the vices of that age. While he could not *punish* his son for the same misadventure, his wounded pride felt satisfied at the entombment of the poor Anarkali for the same *crime*.

3.1.2 Jahangir’s Other Wives

However, mother of Jahangir’s best loved son, Khurram, Jagat Gosain does not find much mention in either the pages of *Tuzuk* or other historical accounts from that period. Only a few casual remarks have been made about her. She pre-deceased her husband but Jahangir very casually refers about the incident of her death. This is unlike his mentioning the death of his first wife Manbai. This lady had filled the life of her husband with warmth and cheerfulness. Melancholic by temperament, this Amber princess had inherited depression from her father. Nevertheless, her charm made Manbai into her husband’s favorite and she was elevated to the status of Shah Begum. The open revolt of Khusrau against his father

¹⁸ Lal 1988: 144

¹⁹ Ibid:144

²⁰ Latif 1892: 186-87

coupled with intrigues of polygamous Mughal household and her own mental weakness that bordered on insanity lead to Manbai's complete breakdown and prompted her to commit suicide by taking overdose of opium in 1604. Jahangir was left utterly devastated by this personal loss, which drew Akbar to write a letter of condolence to him.

Jahangir's last wife however was the legendary Nurjahan. The marriage solemnized in 1611²¹ proved to be Jahangir's last and by all accounts his most successful also. At the time of this marriage Jahangir was a much married man of 42, father to many grown up children while his bride was a 34 year old widow, mother to a child. As Beni Prasad notes, "No figure in medieval history has been shrouded in such romance as the name of Nurjahan calls to the mind. No incident in the reign of Jahangir has attracted such attention as his marriage with Nurjahan. For full fifteen years that celebrated lady stood forth as the most striking and powerful personality in the Mughal empire."²² In the polygamous medieval household the kind of supremacy Nurjahan gained over her husband was almost unthinkable to achieve. What makes her ascendancy all the more intriguing is the fact that at the time of her second marriage with the emperor of Hindustan she was well past her prime, in fact was *old* at 34. Hence in the context of medieval sensibilities she had already lost her sexual appeal and charm and on top of that she was mother to another man's child.

Widow remarriage was a common practice among the Mughals but the kind of ascendancy that Nurjahan gained over her husband was unprecedented.²³ It won't in fact be wrong to say that the romantic legend regarding the young Jahangir (Prince Salim) and (Meherunnisa) and their subsequent marriage is one of the most controversial and intriguing episodes of Mughal history. Reams of paper have been spent speculating and reconstructing historical facts to ascertain the exact nature of a supposed romance between the young prince Salim and his lady love, an immigrant Persian's daughter Meherunnisa. According to sober history Nurjahan was born in 1577 to Mirza Ghiyas Beg and his wife Asmat Begum and was married to a Persian adventurer named Ali Quli Istajlu (later styled

²¹ Prasad 1922: 176

²² Ibid: 170

²³ Lal 1988: 79

Sher Afghan) at 17 and later mothered a daughter to him named Ladli Begum.²⁴ In 1607 Ali Quli was accidentally killed in an encounter with Jahangir's foster brother Qutubuddin Khan. Consequently the late jagirdar's widow was sent to the imperial court. Here she was appointed as lady-in-waiting to Sultan Salima Begum. At the Nauroz festival of 1611²⁵ Jahangir happened to see the widow lady, fell in love and married her the same year.

However the more fanciful version of this story narrates that as a young prince Jahangir was enamored by the beautiful Meherunnisa and wanted to marry her but the proposal was rejected by Akbar and she was married to Ali Quli Istajlu. However Jahangir never lost his love for her, when he was firmly on the throne he ordered his foster brother Qutubuddin Khan to procure his lady love²⁶. However, her husband Sher Afghan refused to comply with the Emperor's wish. In an ensuing scuffle he killed the Bengal governor before being killed by his men. Hence there are two schools of thought regarding the love theory while the supporters of one believe that as a young prince Jahangir had known and loved Meherunnisa and he got her husband killed in order to marry her the theorists of the second school believe that Jahangir chanced to see his last wife in 1611 only and there was no controversy in the circumstances of their marriage.

While no contemporary court chronicler has passed any hint at a possible scandalous affair between Nurjahan and Jahangir, Interestingly enough only few European travelers have elaborately dwelled upon it in their accounts. While most Foreign sources like Thomas Roe, Edward Terry, Pietra Della Valle²⁷ and Peter Mundy²⁸ have remained silent on it. This is quiet not in keeping with the gossip loving attitude of these foreign travelers who were too willing to sieve every possible opportunity to spread rumors against the ruling imperial family.²⁹ What seems more likely is that the story of a scandalous love affair was concocted during Shahjahan's reign to malign the image of his former arch rival Nurjahan. By this time Jahangir was dead, the dowager queen had been exiled to Lahore and Shahjahan was firmly on the throne still the animosity between the new Emperor of Hindustan and his

²⁴ Ibid: 170

²⁵ Srivastava 1952: 269

²⁶ Ibid: 269

²⁷ Valle 1892: 153-55

²⁸ Mundy 1914: 205-206

²⁹ Shujauddin 1967: 12-16

stepmother had not dimmed out and his encouragement to such stories was an attempt at tarnishing the immaculately preserved image of Nurjahan.

Whatever be the truth behind these statements one thing is certain that Jahangir and Nurjahan made a perfect power couple. She was the love of his mature years and brought much peace and contentment to his life. On their marriage in 1611, Jahangir conferred upon his new bride the title of Nur Mahal which was changed to Nur Jahan in 1616. The beautiful lady was indeed the light of her Emperor husband's world. Jahangir did not leave a masterpiece to commemorate his love as did his son Shahjahan but what he dared to do needed much more grit and strength of character- he made Nurjahan the *de facto* ruler. The ascendancy of Nurjahan over her second husband was complete so much so that Jahangir did not take any other wife after her³⁰. The extraordinary power and influence that Nurjahan held proved beneficial to both of them as together they gave form and substance to the various institutions of the Jahangiri period. However keeping an essentially sensual man tied to her within the bounds of a polygamous household remains to be the biggest achievement of Nurjahan and she deserves to be applauded for this commendable feat.

³⁰ Sunderesan 2002: 373

CHAPTER 4

HAREM OF SHAHJAHAN & AURANGJEB

Shahjahan's Early Life and Career

The basic concept of harem was woven around the idea of providing an unrestricted pleasure sanctuary to the sovereign where he could freely indulge in his best loved articles of pleasure- women and wine. Shahjahan was an exceedingly sensual man with an insatiable lust for flesh¹. It's quiet interesting to note that the same Shahjahan who built the Taj Mahal to immortalize conjugal fidelity remained engrossed in debauchery all through his life.²His first betrothal took place with daughter of Asaf Khan and niece of Nurjahan, Arjumand Banu (later Mumtaz Mahal) in 1608³ but incidentally his first marriage was solemnized on 29 October 1610 with the daughter of Mirza Hussain Safavi. Arjumand Banu had to wait for a long period of five years before her marriage with Khurram.⁴ Thus we see that in those days political considerations weighed too heavily upon human sentiments. In the context of Shahjahan and all other Mughals it needs to be understood that the medieval notions of conjugal fidelity were a strange mix of women's subjugation and men's reckless sexual behavior. While on the one hand a woman was expected to be submitted to her lord, her husband was free to please himself with any number of women he liked. Such was the value of love in the medieval times. Marriages were primarily aimed at gaining either political advantage or merely to satisfy the sovereign's whims and fancies.⁵

4.1 Shahjahan's Lasciviousness and frivolities

Pages of history are filled with innumerable instances of Shahjahn's lasciviousness and deviant behavior. Foreign travelers like Manucci and Bernier have also testified to

¹ Lal 1988: 163

² Ibid:157

³ Jahangir 1989: 366-67

⁴ Saksena 1968: 8-14

⁵ Lal 1988: 158

Shahjahan's lust for women. Manucci wrote, "It would seem that the only thing Shahjahan cared for was the search for women to serve his pleasure." Names of Shahjahan's wives as recorded in history are: Qandahari Begum and Sirhindi Begum besides the legendary Mumtaz Mahal who continued to be his favorite queen throughout her life and perhaps even after death. Mother of his fourteen children for whom he dedicatedly constructed the wonder in marble called Taj Mahal. However strangely enough the Mughal monarch's love for his wife was not sufficient enough to restrict him from engaging in the innumerable scandals of his life. While the court chroniclers from the period paint him as an ideal Muslim monarch the foreign travelers like Bernier and Manucci have recorded many scandals related to his private life including the horrible charge of incest leveled against him. These European writers have projected Shahajahan as a lascivious man involved in acts of monstrous carnality.

We are told by foreign traveler accounts that all the beautiful women in the empire were open to satisfy the Mughal sovereign's lust. While few of them surrendered themselves willingly others were forced to do so. Shahjahan's intimate relations with wives of two noblemen named Khalilullah Khan and Jafar Khan was an open secret. In fact whenever these ladies went to the royal court the beggars would cry out "Oh breakfast of Shahjahan" remember us to Jafar's wife and to Khalilullah's wife they would say "Oh luncheon of Shahjahan, succour us"⁶ Interestingly the wife of Jafar Khan named Farzana Begum happened to be Mumtaz Mahal's sister. Even this did not stop the lustful Shahjahan from making unwarranted advances at her. The bestial connection had exceeded all limits of decency so much so that people called Namdar Khan, a son of Jafar Khan born to Farzana Begum as Shahjahan's child. Father Sebastian Manrique moves a step forward in accusing Shahjahan of molesting the wife of his brother-in-law Shaista Khan with the help of his daughter Jahanara. Not to forget Peter Mundy charging the Mughal emperor having an incestuous relationship with his daughter Chamni Begum⁷.

⁶ manucci 1906: 1.195 2 Ibid 1906:1.187

⁷ Saksena 1968: 337

We have another instance when Shahjahan fell in love with one of the *Kanchanis* and kept her in the harem as a concubine. On reportedly being told by people that a woman of such lowly rank was not fit to be included among the respectable harem ladies the enchanted emperor reportedly said “*Mitahi nek har dukan kih bashad*” which means “sweetmeats are good, whatever shop they come from.”⁸ All these incidents took place in spite of the Emperor having a vast harem filled with many wives, concubines, singing and dancing girls to amuse and please him. We can’t lose sight of the fact that Shahjahan remained lustful till the very end of his life and even asked Aurangzeb to let him retain his harem during his imprisonment in the fort of Agra. A request which was magnanimously fulfilled by the *benevolent* son.⁹

The Mina Bazaar was begun in the time of Akbar but during the rule of grandeur loving Shahjahan it became very lavish and grand. Writing about it Bernier notes that, “A whimsical kind of fair is sometimes held during these festivities in the Mahal...it is conducted by the handsomest and most engaging of wives of the Omrahs and principal Mansabdars...These bewitching females act the part of traders, while the purchasers are the king, Begums or princesses.”¹⁰ While Peter Mundy more openly writes that “to this fair the wives and daughters of all sort come no man daring to refuse to sending them if the king require them.”¹¹ As per foreign travelers like Manucci and Bernier Shahjahan who was always on a look out for pretty ladies was served well by Meena Bazar where he chose his favorites¹² who were later conveyed to him through trusted and experienced matrons. We are told that the fair lasted eight days and the women participants were not allowed to go to their homes during that period. The palace gates remained closed all this while with only one man inside- the king.

It is not possible to say with certainty that whether the charges of degraded morality and unhealthy sexual behavior leveled against Shahjahan are true or not because no contemporary Indian author has indicated to that effect. Akbarabadi Mahal and Fatahpuri

⁸ Manucci I 1906: 189

⁹ Bernier 1934:166

¹⁰ Ibid:272

¹¹ Mundy 1914:128

¹² Manucci I 1906: 188

Mahal were two favorite slave girls of the fifth Mughal king.¹³ Unlike his father and grandfather Shahjahan did not marry many women. He is told to have had only three wives but had many concubines and he maintained a large harem. However it seems unlikely that an enterprising and ambitious man like Shahjahan could have achieved what all he did had he just been a sexual pervert as Banarsi Prasad Saksena the biggest authority over Shahjahan notes “the sweeping statements of European travelers are like so many generalizations, far from truth.”¹⁴ With all fairness we can say that he might have indulged in some frivolities in his lifetime but this does not let him become an evil pervert as the Europeans have tried to do. Therefore before passing any judgment upon Shahjahan we should not forget that in the medieval age philandering and flirtation were a routine affair among Royalty and they did not pose a serious threat to the image of sovereign in that age.

As far as Shahjahan’s love for music and dance is considered, this son of Jahangir enjoyed the company of singing and dancing girls and for this reason a huge staff of the same was kept at court.¹⁵ *Kanchanis* was the name by which singing and dancing girls were collectively known. During the eight day Meena Bazar celebrations these kanchanis would entertain their master. As per the general tradition these women visited the emperor every Wednesday to pay their respects Shahjahan is said to have detained them all night for the purpose of frolicking and merry- making.

4.2 Aurangjeb’s Harem Life

Born on 4 November 1618 to Shahjahan and his wife Mumtaz Mahal at Dohad¹⁶ near Ujjain, Aurangjeb was the last big name in the list of Mughal emperors to have occupied the throne of Hindustan. Though the Mughal King remained the titular head till 1658 when the last of them Bahadur Shah was deported to Rangoon by the British.¹⁷ However, the glory and sheen of the Mughal dynasty was gone with this sixth Mughal emperor. In his 89 year old life he was destined for a chequered career.¹⁸ Unlike his father Shahjahan, grandfather Jahangir and even great grandfather Akbar, Aurangjeb did not suffer from the

¹³ Saksena 1968: 337

¹⁴ Saksena 1968: 337

¹⁵ Manucci II 1906: 6

¹⁶ Manucci II 1906: 6

¹⁷ Eraly 1997: 513

¹⁸ Ibid:384

weakness for flesh. However, he can't be claimed to have been completely free from the trademark Mughal sensuality. Manucci writes, "although the women in the Mahal treat themselves so sumptuously Aurangzeb sees no harm. For all Mohemmdans are very fond of women, who are their principal relaxation and almost their only pleasure. Further it is an ancient custom of the Mughal kings to behave this way."¹⁹ Aurangzeb restricted himself to the religiously sanctioned number of four wives. His first marriage was solemnized at the age of nineteen with Dilras Banu Begum. His infatuation for a Hindu dancing girl named Hirabai had in fact taken him to the doors of intemperance. A fact that he acknowledged later in his life but overall his personal life remained modeled according to the ideal religious moral code.

All the Mughals from Babur to Shahjahan were fond of drinking and taking drugs and different kinds of intoxicants were freely used by them but Aurangzeb was an exception in this regard and is said to have never touched vine except once at the insistence of a dancing girl named Zainabadi. He was a devout Muslim, would say his daily prayers without a fail, and was plain in his dress and food .He took certain stringent measures to curtail the lasciviousness of Mughal state. He not only ordered the dancing girls and prostitutes to either marry or move out of the Empire but also enforced symbolic burial of music and turned out musicians from his court.²⁰ However despite all his regulations wine and women continued to form two principle pleasures of the Mughals. From royal family to nobility everybody was steeped in debauchery. Aurangzeb himself claimed that except him and his Qazi Abdul Wahab all others in the empire drank. However contrary to Aurangzeb's belief Manucci informs us that the Qazi was given to drinking.²¹

4.2.1 Aurangzeb's marriages

As already mentioned Aurangzeb took four wives. His first wife was Dilras Banu Begum daughter of Shah Nawaz Khan a relative of Shah Ismail of Persia. This lady died at the time of giving birth to her son Azam. She was buried near Aurangabad and Aurangzeb

¹⁹ Lal 1988: 164

²⁰ Manucci II 1906: 8-9

²¹ Ibid: 5-6

raised an exact replica of the Taj Mahal over her grave better known as the *Bibi Ka Makbara*. Headstrong Aurangzeb is said to have been in awe of his Persian wife, which gets reflected in his own statement about her.²², “(she) was a woman of extreme imperiousness, but to the end of her life I continued to love her and never once did I wound her feelings.”²³ The second wife of Aurangzeb named Rehmat-un-Nisa was the daughter of Raja Raju of Kashmir. Her real name was Nawab Bai. Her sons Muazzam and Bahadur Shah had revolted against their father Aurangzeb which caused great unease to her and she ended her life in 1691 A.D. Aurangabadi Mahal was the third wife of Aurangzeb. Nothing is known about her parentage. She died of plague in 1688 at Bijapur.²⁴ As per Manucci, Udaipuri Mahal was the fourth wife of Aurangzeb. She was a Georgian slave girl in the harem of Dara Shukoh and after his death had been included in Aurangzeb’s harem. She was the love of Aurangzeb’s old age and is known to have deeply influenced the emperor. So much so that he not only forgave her son Kam Bakhsh for many faults of his but didn’t take notice of Udaipuri’s vice of drinking.²⁵.

4.2.2 Zainabadi Episode

Besides these lawfully wedded wives Aurangzeb had another favorite named Hira Bai who later became famous as Zainabadi. In this connection it becomes poignant to note the words of Edward Terry who wrote that the prostitutes sometimes say that he (husband, nobleman or king) cannot love his wife, “ be she ever be so amiably lovely , and for this reason, because she is his wife.”²⁶. After his appointment as the Governor of Deccan when Aurangzeb was headed towards Aurangabad, at Burhanpur he took notice of Hira Bai a dancing girl in the entourage of his maternal uncle Saif Khan (governor of Burhanpur) whose very first sight compelled the Mughal prince, a much married man and father of six children to lose control over his senses and dramatically fall flat on the ground under a fit of love.

²² Garg 2014: 309

²³ Eraly 1997: 395

²⁴ Garg 2014:309

²⁵ Ibid: 310

²⁶ Terry 1655: 286-87

A slightly different version of this romantic episode finds mention in *Maasir-ul-Umara* which substitutes Saif Khan for a nobleman named Mir Khalil²⁷ and credits Zainabadi as an expert singer and musician. Her effect over Aurangzeb was so huge that once on her insistence he had brought the cup of wine to his mouth. However after testing sincerity of his feelings for herself Hira Bai threw it off. However the romance could not last for long, as the lady love of otherwise austere Aurangzeb died an early death. This entire episode throws light on Aurangzeb's character and personal life. Known to be a devout Muslim and champion of faith even he was not untouched by the sensual charms of life. His falling head over heels for Zainabadi shows the habit of Mughal princes' falling in love every now and then. It is mentioned that on the death of this lady Aurangzeb was utterly saddened and went out hunting to find solace for his injured heart. Isn't it ironical to note that how little was the value of a woman's life in those days? Manucci mentions that "In after days he (Aurangzeb) was accustomed to say that God had been very gracious to him by putting an end to that dancing girl's life, by reason of whom he had committed so many inequities."²⁸

From his four marriages ten children were born to Aurangzeb. Of these five were mothered by his Persian wife Dilras Banu Begum. As a father Aurangzeb is known to have handled his children with a rough hand. Ever suspicious by nature he never let any of his children come close to him and always doubted their intentions. Voicing his feelings he once told his son Muazzam that he trusted no one and was suspicious of his own shadow.²⁹ Aurangzeb would not hesitate from humiliating and ridiculing his own sons publicly. While Akbar fled out of the country owing to his father's fear. Another of his son Muhammad Sultan died in captivity enforced upon him by his father³⁰ Not to forget the imprisonment of his favorite daughter Zeb-un-Nisa for sympathizing with her rebellious brother Akbar. The family life of Aurangzeb remained mostly devoid of love and lasting friendships. When he finally died disillusioned on 3 March 1707 he only had his faithful daughter Zinat-un-Nisa and wife Udaipuri by his side.³¹

²⁷ Bahadur 1912: 36-38

²⁸ Manucci I 1906: 231

²⁹ Eraly 1997: 508

³⁰ Garg 2014: 312

CHAPTER 5

A DETAILED STUDY OF MUGHAL HAREM LIFE

Architectural Character of Harem

The first two Mughals Babur and Humayun maintained harems but it developed as a well established and regulated institutional set-up during the reign of the third Mughal Akbar.¹ In fact the original and best specimen of Mughal harem architecture could be found at the Fatehpur Sikri Fort complex. An open courtyard called the *chawk* was situated in the midst of the palace complex. Double-storied buildings were constructed on either two or all the four sides of these courtyards making them open to air and sunlight. The *chawk* formed an intrinsic part of the harem life where all the ladies gathered on festivities.² Sometimes there were many courts with their respective gardens. Each building had its own court and garden. These gardens in turn had water reservoirs like channels, fountains, and tanks, which added the element of coolness during the hot summer season and were used by ladies as relaxing agencies. Capacious terraces were covered with *jaali* railings to let the veiled beauties enjoy the view of surrounding landscape and gardens.

Each building was provided with toilets of its own besides there were toilets on one side of the residential structure for the whole unit. The modern concept of combined toilet and bathroom is found here in the form of *hammams*.³ There were separate toilets lined at the edge of building complex as well. This is evident from remnants of such structures at harem quarters in the Agra Fort. The toilets were secured with high walls to maintain total security and privacy of the harem inmates. Scavenging technique was employed to ensure proper cleaning of these toilets.⁴ The practice of allotting a complete double-storied apartment with its own set of courtyard, garden, *dalan* (verandah) were provided for the residence of queens and concubines. However given the large number of Begums and other women it

¹ Lal 1988: 25

² Foster 1921: 183

³ Lal 1988 :40

⁴ Nath 1994: 14

is highly unlikely that all of them had this privilege but at least the most prominent ones did have the luxury of living in their own private apartments with their own entourage of maids and female servants.

However it is important to note that all these apartments and annexes were interconnected through a series of corridors and passages⁵ Thus in spite of privacy and seclusion of harem ladies, strict vigil was kept upon the women lodged inside the harem precincts. There was only one gate for entry and exit, which was under strict surveillance. No effort was left unturned to provide the *zenana* ladies with a comfortable and lavish life inside the harem. All the amenities of the world were at their feet. If these material comforts brought real happiness to these ladies or not is a debatable issue and will be dealt with later in this work but the chronicles of that age combined with architectural vestiges establish beyond doubt that harem quarters were spacious and airy complexes with proper arrangements for light which were meant to provide healthy living conditions to its inmates.⁶

Another important aspect of the Mughal harem structures is the presence of underground chambers, which were connected with secret stairways. Remains of such specimen structures still exist in the Agra Fort.⁷ These chambers were in turn provided with their own tanks and fountains that rendered them cool. Thus these underground establishments acted as the choicest retreat of Emperor and his ladies from the scorching heat of Indian summer. Not to mention the role they played in keeping strict vigil over the harem inmates as the underground stairways opened in various annexes. Thus they could be secretly used by the king to surprise the ladies of the harem. We have architectural remains of a *phansigar* or execution house to suggest that the harem life was closely guarded and any violation to its sanctity was considered anathema⁸

Another fact regarding the harem establishment is that many *Begums* (queens) and *Shehjadis* (princesses) of note had their own palaces outside the fort. Akbar's wife *Ruqaiyya Sultan Begum* had a palace of her own on the riverside in Agra. So had *Shahzadi*

⁵ Nath 1994: 16

⁶ Mukerjee 2001:30

⁷ Nath 1994: 12

⁸ Ibid: 18

Begum, Jehangir's sister. Not to forget Nurjahan who had palaces to her credit in Agra, Lahore and Kashmir. As did Jahanara Begum who had her own palace in Lahore and Delhi.⁹

5.1 Institutional Set-up

By now it has become very clear that the harem as an institution was given a formal and structured form during the time of Akbar.¹⁰ Not only systematic and orderly running of it was ensured but its safety and security was also keenly taken care of. In fact the harem had become a symbol of sanctity and power of the Royal Mughal house. Abul Fazal's *Ain* gives discreet description of the imperial seraglio:

“Though there are more than five thousand women, he (Akbar) has given to each a separate apartment. He has also divided them into sections, and keeps them attentive to their duties. Several chaste women have been appointed as *Daroghas* and superintendents over each section....Thus as in the imperial offices; everything is here also in proper order. The salaries are sufficiently liberal. If a woman wants anything within the limits of her salary, she applies to one of the *Tahwildars* (cash keepers) of the seraglio. The *Tahwildar* then sends a memorandum to the writer, who checks it, then the general treasurer makes the payment in cash.”¹¹

The above description makes it abundantly clear that the harem was a well organized, meticulously managed and cared for institution during and after Akbar's reign. There was a huge battery of women to take care of the daily needs of its inmates and ensure its smooth running on a day-to-day basis. It becomes imperative to clear the air about the sexual activity of all the women lodged inside its precincts. It is quite interesting to note that only a miniscule number of harem women had a sexual role to play and they were either king's queens, concubines or slave girls other than them there was a barrage of maid-servants whose job was to serve the harem inmates and ensure maintenance and functioning of the harem.¹² The Mughal harem since the time of Akbar came to acquire the status of a full-

⁹ pelsaert 1925:2-3 ; laet 1925: 37-39

¹⁰ Lal 1988: 25

¹¹ Fazal I 1993: 46

¹² Nath 1994: 19

fledged office that observed the same discipline and rules as any other royal office did. As Abul Fazal mentions in the *Ain*, the salaries of the ladies though fixed were huge. Looking at the figures of Akbar's harem the women officers were generously paid. Women at the highest level were given Rs.1610-1028 per month excluding the gifts that were bestowed upon them by the emperor from time to time. However the ordinary maid-servants drew anywhere between Rs. 51- Rs.2 per month but given the value of things in those days, these amounts were substantially high.

Besides taking care of the day-to-day wants of the servants of the seraglio, the *nawis* (writer) maintained the estimated record of total yearly expenditure of the harem also. Based on this estimate a summary statement was prepared. The grant of money was released after getting imperial seal reserved for the purpose of harem only. From the imperial treasury the money grant was given to the general *tahwildar*¹³ who further distributed it among several *tahwildars*. It must be noted that all these money disbursing officials were male and thus were denied entry into the *zenana*. All the demands were made through the maid-servants and eunuchs.

It is well known that the Mughal harem was not stationed at one place, in fact its residents lived in many forts and cities. Due to warfare, excursions, climate change during hot summer months among other reasons the sovereign was often on the move, not all but few select women accompanied him. While most of them were left at the imperial harem many others were left with their servant-girls and attendants on the way of king's route. European traveler *De Laet* has mentioned that Akbar had raised many female quarters in the vicinity of Agra and each had the capacity to accommodate sixteen ladies along with servants.¹⁴ As the king's retinue was often on the move every care was taken to ensure the safety and comfort of the ladies of *zenana*, while strict *pardah* was observed throughout.

The royal ladies used various means of covered transportation like elephant-*ambaris*, *chandols*, camel litters and *palkis* as evidenced by the paintings of that period. Abul Fazal tells us about the *extraordinary carriages* invented by Akbar. Of them he writes, "It is drawn by one elephant. It is made sufficiently large so as to hold several bath-rooms, and

¹³ Fazal 1993:46

¹⁴ Laet 1875: 44

thus serves as a travelling bath.”¹⁵ The most special feature of these carts was the privacy that they provided to the travelers. While the ladies could easily see outside they in turn could not be seen from outside. According to Father Monserrate during the time of Akbar the royal journeys were not very pompous, the queens sat upon elephant back in decorated *howdas* under the guard of 500 old men, at times one of royal princes escorted the touring party.¹⁶ We are informed by the chroniclers that no pedestrian or cavalier was allowed to come near the procession and in case this happened the eunuchs and footmen travelling with the party beat the encroacher mercilessly. The long distance travel was carried out at a rather slow pace. Thomas Roe informs us that the usual rate of female travel party was 5 *Kos* or 3 miles per day.¹⁷

5.1.1 Harem in Camp Dwellings

Ain-I-Akbari mentions that how every care was taken to provide for the comfort and safety of king and his harem ladies even in the midst of journey: Canvas was used to erect harem in camps.¹⁸ It is to be noted that there were two set of tents which were used while travelling. While one was used for staying, the other was sent in advance to encamp at the next halting point. However camp life was not always synonymous with tent structures raised in countryside or some remote corner in the country. Most of the time royal ladies lived in forts and palaces even in the times of campaign. Hence the camp life was not all rigor and toil it was comfortable and luxurious also. Palaces had been raised in different parts of the country by the Mughals from Kashmir in the north to Burhanpur in the south of the country. In fact festivals and ceremonies formed an important part of the camp life. In the midst of all this the guards and eunuchs remained on their toes ensuring the safety and sanctity of the harem.¹⁹ No trespassing was allowed and in case of violation firm action was taken against the guilty.

¹⁵ Fazal I 1993: 285

¹⁶ Monserrate 1922: 50,79;Fazal III 1993: 325

¹⁷ Roe 1873: 324

¹⁸ Fazal 1993: 47

¹⁹ Fazal 1993: 48

5.1.2 Safety and Security of Harem

However the most important and novel was the approach adopted towards ensuring the safety and security of the imperial seraglio. Notes Vincent Smith, “The imperial harem constituted a town in itself, the maintenance and control of such a multitude of women necessitated a carefully devised system of internal administration and the organization of adequate arrangements for discipline.”²⁰ It is quite understandable that the maintenance and smooth running of a mammoth institution like harem would have been a herculean task and it goes to the credit and organizational acumen of a visionary king like Akbar to have given it a structural and institutional character. James Todd has rightly brought out the intricacies and complexities involved in the management of medieval harem. He thus writes about Mughal harem’s Rajput equivalent the raniwas, ”The government of the kingdom is but an amusement compared with such a task, for it is within the *Rawala* (Antahpur) that intrigue is enthroned.”²¹ It is no secret that the Rajput harem or *Raniwas* had close affinity with the Mughal harem. As the women in the Mughal harem were drawn from different milieu with differing racial, ethnic, social, and even religious backgrounds it was no child’s play to keep such heterodox set of elements in proper order and discipline under one roof.²²

The contemporary sources inform us that there was a set of women officials to cater to the maintenance and smooth running of the harem on a day-to-day basis. Women officers called *Daroghas* were chiefly responsible for the internal administration of the harem. Various other female officials like *Mahaldars*, *Mushrifs*, *Tahwildars* and *Begis* were also there. These female officers were divided into three categories: the *Mahin Banu* (high), *Paristaran-i-hudur* (middle) and the low.²³ The Mahaldar had a supervisory role and she closely watched the internal proceedings of the seraglio. Tahwildar was lady accountant who managed the salaries of staff members. Mushrifs acted like superintendents while Begis were lady guards stationed outside female quarters. This administrative system of harem established by Akbar continued unabated till the end of Mughal dynasty with few

²⁰ Smith 1988: 260-61

²¹ Tod 1920: 358

²² Nath 1994: 11

²³ Ansari 1983: 69

minor changes. The Emperor paid personal attention to 20 Smith 1988: 260-61 the functioning and management of harem affairs, which²⁴ becomes clear from the fact that he himself appointed the Daroghas. These ladies were not only highly educated, intelligent, sharp and well informed but many of them came from high class families, highlighting the importance of this post. Like officials to assist him in general administration of the empire, the king had his female staff inside the harem, which worked on similar lines. Besides working as *waqianawis* (newswriters) and reporters the ablest among them even worked as teachers to princesses.

The second grade officials were chiefly entrusted with the duty of managing and controlling maid servants and dancing girls besides looking after the general administration of the harem. A hierarchical structure was strictly followed to manage these matrons also. *Ain* informs us that each matron was in charge of a certain number of subordinate matrons who were in charge of some other matrons in turn. Another senior *mahal* official was the *Tahwildar*²⁵ who was in charge of accounts. Her role became important since she was to be approached for all cash related needs of the harem inmates and further more she was the disbursing authority as well. Thus these women officers formed the backbone of the gigantic imperial institution called the harem from the time of Akbar onwards and barring a few exceptions the trust reposed in them never went betrayed.

We do know that the emperor took food and slept in the harem, thus the epicenter of Mughal Empire that is the sovereign himself was at the disposal of these mahal officials. Abul Fazal writes, "The inside of the harem is guarded by sober and active women; the most trustworthy of them are placed about the apartments of his Majesty. Outside the enclosure the eunuchs are placed; and at a proper distance, there is a guard of faithful *Rajputs*, beyond whom are the porters of the gates. Besides on all four sides, there are guards of nobles, *Ahadis*, and other troops, according to their ranks....Notwithstanding the great number of faithful guards, his Majesty does not dispense with his own vigilance, but keeps the whole in proper order."²⁶ Thus the king's bed chamber was the most high security

²⁴ Nath 1994: 11

²⁵ Lal 1988: 53

²⁶ Fazal 1993: 46

place within the seraglio. The *Mahal* gates were guarded by *Tartari*, *Turki*, *Habshi* and *Kashmiri* women.²⁷ These women were skilled in use of bows and arrows and since they were drawn from different ethnicities most of the time they failed to understand the conversation of native women living in the *zenana* thus maintaining cold distance from them. These guard women were ferocious and known for their tough stance and callousness. While sometimes fear of punishment prevented them from allowing any kind of infringement of rules on part of harem ladies. These lady guards were under the command of *khwajasara*, the highest authority with respect to the harem.

5.1.2.1 *Eunuchs*

The eunuchs were an indispensable part of the Mughal harem.²⁸ The need to ensure the safety of seraglio produced the requirement for such castrated men who were not only safe in the context of harem women but at the same time were physically strong enough to ensure the safety of the Mahal and its inmates. However they were not permitted to go inside the *haremsara* or the enclosure. Like Daroghas these eunuchs were bound by a hierarchical structure. The general term for them was *khwajasara*²⁹ and the senior ones were called *Nazir*. We have examples of some eunuchs who rose to high offices and gathered much wealth in the realms of the Mughals, some of them even became *mansabdars* and governors, the junior ones worked as either messengers or door-keepers. Since Akbar directly equated honor with female chastity, by all means it was to be ensured that *his* women observed seclusion in the strictest sense, they were not only to be cut off from the outside world, no man was to be allowed inside the harem except the king himself³⁰ even the nearest of male relations like brothers and father had to seek permission to go inside, we have on record the fact that in the entire Mughal history only Nurjahan's father *Itimad- ud- Daulah* and prince *Karna* of Mewar had the privilege of entering the female apartments unhindered.

In such circumstances the eunuch found himself in a highly profitable position. The

²⁷ Misra 1967: 79

²⁸ Lal 1988: 56

²⁹ Mukerjee 2001: 39

³⁰ Nath 1994: 53

eunuchs were not just the harem guards, they were responsible for the safety of the Emperor's person, who slept, ate and spent considerable time in the harem, thus Khwaja Sara must have been a man of great ability and integrity as in the middle ages, king was the source of all power, his life was to be saved and protected at all costs. Every wife of the king was guarded by 2-3 eunuchs to ensure that no man except her husband could see or come near to her and in case of failing in his duty they persisted the danger of losing one's life. For this reason these eunuchs held a very important position in the harem as their services were indispensable to both the ladies of the harem and the master

Security by Other Elements

As the third line of protection faithful Rajput soldiers were posted outside the mahal ably accompanied by Ahadis and other troopers. It is to be noted that the custom of appointing Rajput guards in harem security originated with Akbar and continued till the fall of the Mughal dynasty. Both female guards inside the harem and the Rajput and other troops outside of it changed their duties once in twenty four hours.³¹

5.2 Dress, Ornaments & Cosmetics

As mentioned many times earlier the harem ladies' chief focus was to keep the master happy and pleased with them. Hence beauty and youth became their most favored tools in this tough enterprise. Aided by a large entourage of maid servants and attendants they would spend hours in decorating themselves. Owing to the long association of Mughals with the Rajputs the traditional attire of their women underwent great change. Likewise the native ladies dressing also underwent some change. The biggest change was observed in terms of stitched clothes which were hitherto not known in India.³² In fact a new and distinct style of dressing evolved during this period which could be evidenced in the contemporary Kangra style of paintings.³³ The women in these paintings are shown wearing short, close-fitted bodices showing bare midriff, long loose pants touching the ankles of the wearer under thin, long skirts coupled with a dupatta thrown over the head.

³¹ Jourdain 163

³² Mukerjee 2001: 81

³³ Dar 1969:38

The faces however remain uncovered.³⁴ More or less this remained the signature style of dressing among women with few modifications throughout the Mughal age.

The clothes worn by these women were most exquisite and tasteful. Known for their delicacy, light weight, and vibrant colors these ensembles added to the charm of the harem ladies. In this regard we have the testimony of English ambassador to the court of Jahangir, Thomas Roe, who enthralled by the dazzling apparel of Jahangir's wives wrote, "If I had no other light, their diamonds and pearls had sufficed to show them."³⁵ Different varieties of textile were used to craft the most exquisite and fashionable clothes variously called *Ab-e-Rawan* (running water), *Baft Hawa* (woven air) and *Shabnam* (evening dew)³⁶. Known for their sheerness, dresses made from these clothes were so transparent that they gave the impression of nakedness. One such famous anecdote is of Aurangzeb complaining to his daughter Zeb-un-nisa for wearing such see-through clothes. To this she replied that she was wearing seven layers of clothing.³⁷

The women always covered their heads either with a dupatta studded with decorative motifs of all kind or a turban embellished with rubies and ostrich feathers.³⁸ The fashion of wearing figure hugging *cholis* (bodices) was begun by a daughter of Aurangzeb.³⁹ Another kind of clothing were transparent smocks that reached up to the waist of these ladies⁴⁰. Mughal women usually wore loose fitting or tight bottom pants touching their ankles.⁴¹ These pants or trousers were tied at the naval with a *nara* (silver string). Another popular ladies garment was the *jagulfi*. It was a kind of loose gown fastened at neck and waist with long, tight sleeves⁴² The Rajput ladies generally wore their traditional dress comprising of *lehenga* (petticoat), *choli* (bodice), and *odhni* (scarf) but there is evidence of their adopting Mughal dresses like trousers and *shalwars* (breeches). Many of them wore modified forms of *jagulfi*.

³⁴ Findly 1993 :165

³⁵ Roe 1873: 282-83

³⁶ Coomaraswami 1965:196

³⁷ Lal 1988:122

³⁸ Aziz 1947: 212-13

³⁹ Dar 1969: 40

⁴⁰ Thevenot 1976 :384

⁴¹ Hamilton 1930: 97

⁴² Coomaraswamy 1927 : 131

Cotton, silk and wool was chiefly used to make garments. Linen (*malmal*), velvet (*makhmal*), lappet (*chikan*), damask (*jamdani*) were other frequently used raw materials. During winter season there was the custom of wearing *Qabas* or long woolen gowns and fine Kashmiri shawls atop the regular garments. The shawls were so thin that they could easily pass between a small finger ring.⁴³ Items like gloves and stockings did not form part of Mughal women's dressing. Whenever the ladies went out of the harem they covered themselves in *Burqa* from head to toe. Manucci vividly writes, "Ordinarily they wear two or even three garments, each weighing not more than one ounce, and worth from forty to fifty rupees each. This is without counting the lace that they are in the habit of adding. They sleep in these clothes, and renew them every twenty four hours, and never put them on again, but give them away to their servants."⁴⁴ There was a separate department of clothes called *Tushak Khana* where garments were stitched and prepared.⁴⁵

During the time of Jahangir there was great advancement in the field of fashionable clothing. Known for his aesthetic taste Jahangir himself made elaborate changes in his dress, headgear and other paraphernalia associated with the Royal court.⁴⁶ Nurjahan on her part substantially influenced the contemporary styles of women's dressing. Many new textiles and styles of clothing are known to be products of her fertile imagination like *badla*, *kinari*, *dudami*, *panchtoliya* etc. She is evidenced to have designed the famous *Nurmahali* dress worn on marriages. *Farsh-i-Chandni* was a kind of carpet of her making which became famous during her time.⁴⁷

5.2.1 Ornaments & Jewelry

Ornaments are every woman's proud possession be it a queen or a commoner. In Indian society gold and silver ornaments have been considered as highly auspicious.⁴⁸ Muslims also attach great value to wearing of jewelry. For married women it is customary to wear various kinds of ornaments signifying their married status. While the rich would go for

⁴³ Manucci 1906: 318

⁴⁴ Ibid: 318

⁴⁵ Aziz 1972 :4

⁴⁶ Findly 1993: 222

⁴⁷ Pant 1930: 118

⁴⁸ Rothfeld 1928 : 192

more precious metals like gold and silver, the poor would adorn themselves with copper, brass, stone, or wood ornaments. Since ancient times ears and nose of girls are pierced at a very young age in order to wear suitable ornaments in them. The Mughal period saw a fusion of Hindu and Muslim cultures. Ornaments too on their part could not remain unaffected from this phenomenon.

Going by the account of Abul Fazal there were thirty seven different kinds of jewels and ornaments worn in those times. Here is given a detailed list of them:

5.2.2 Ornaments & Jewelry

- Head ornaments: Sisphul, Maang, Sekra, Binduli, Kotbiladar
- Nose ornaments: Besar, Phuli, Laung, Nath
- Ear ornaments: Khuntala, Karnaphul, Durbachh, Pipal-patti, Bali, Champakali, Mor bhanwar
- Neck ornaments: Guluband, Hans
- Hand ornaments: Kangan, Gajra, Churin, Bazuband, Tad, Anguthi
- Foot/Ankle ornaments: Jehar, Pail, Ghunghru, Anwat, Bichwah
- Miscellaneous ornaments: Chhudra-kantika, Kati-mekhla

Mughals being one of the richest people of their times could easily afford the most precious and exquisite kinds of jewels and ornaments. The best *karigars* were employed to work out the most perfect and dazzling pieces of craftsmanship. Manucci mentions that it was difficult for him to feel the pulse of his patients owing to its being too covered up⁴⁹ with ornaments. Another interesting information provided by the Italian traveler is of the thumb ring studded with a mirror(*arsi*) which women would “fondly” use to look into.⁵⁰ The money spent on these articles came from the hefty purse of the ladies themselves or were

⁴⁹ Manucci 1906: 317

⁵⁰ Ibid : 317

given as gifts to them by the emperor from time to time. Hence they could afford to possess six to eight set of jewels with them tells Manucci.⁵¹

5.2.3 Cosmetics & Dressing up

It is said that the beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. However, in a polygamous household to come into the eyes of the Lord it certainly needed some effort on the part of the beautiful damsels. There was an elaborate routine of makeup and dressing that was followed by the royal ladies. All kind of oils, creams, and lotions were profusely used to keep them beautiful and alluring. The author of *Ain-i-Akbari* gives an exhaustive list of sixteen things, which formed a part of woman's grooming routine or *Solah Sringar* in those days:

“1) Bathing, (2) Anointing oneself with oil, (3) Braiding the hair, (4) Decking the crown of hair with jewels, (5) Applying sandalwood paste, (6) Wearing beautiful dresses, (7) Sectarial marks of caste, (8) Collyrium, (9) Wearing ear-rings, (10) Adorning with nose rings of pearls and gold, (11) Wearing ornaments round the neck, (12) Decking with garlands of flowers or pearls, (13) Staining the hands, (14) Wearing a belt hung with small bells, (15) Decorating the feet with gold ornaments, (16) Eating *pan*”⁵²

Hair dressing formed an essential part of overall grooming routine. Different kinds of hairstyles and decorative methods were used in those days.”Their hair is always very well dressed, plaited, and perfumed with scented oil,” writes Manucci⁵³. Women used items like pearl, jewels, and flowers to adorn their hair. Many beautiful hairstyles were also in fashion and so were the hair dyes which were frequently used in those days. Among popularly used cosmetics of that age was collyrium which would color the eyes and brows black. *Pan* was habitually chewed to paint the lips red though it discolored the teeth. It becomes essential to mention here that the habit of chewing beetle had reached such a pass that Jahanara and Zeb-un-Nisa's respective revenues earned from Surat were spent to meet the expenses of

⁵¹ Manucci 1906: 317

⁵² Fazal III 1993: 342

⁵³ Manucci II 1906: 318

zenana incurred over beetle chewing. Manucci makes mention of practice of designing henna (*mendy*) over hands and feet which gave the impression of wearing red gloves.⁵⁴

5.2.4 Scents & Perfumes

All the Mughal men and women were fond of scents and perfumes. Akbar's chronicler Abul Fazal gives a detailed account of various kinds of perfume and their respective prices. Thus writes he, "His Majesty is very fond of perfumes, and encourages this department from religious motives. The court hall is continually scented with ambergris, aloewood....whilst sweet smelling flowers are used in large numbers."⁵⁵ Akbar's son Jahangir, an admirer of natural beauty has given detailed account of invention of *Itr-i-Jahangiri*, a new kind of perfume, which was invented by his mother-in-Law Asmat Begum. Jahangir mentions in his memoirs that a single drop of this scent was sufficient to perfume an entire assembly. For this invention the son-in-Law happily rewarded Asmat Begum with a pearl necklace.⁵⁶

The general opinion of harem is that of a pleasure house meant for the sexual gratification of one man. Thus the entire focus was on unbridled sexual activity while the truth is that this was just a part of seraglio life, harem was a distinct entity with a very broad canvas. It is generally held that the women bound within the four walls of zenana were idle gossip-mongers who spent their empty hours in adorning and decorating themselves. This indeed was an undeniable feature of the zenana establishment but *just* an aspect of it as harem inmates actively engaged in many other constructive pursuits. While Aurangjeb's daughter Zeb-un-nisa's austerity and aversion for cosmetics and fashion is well known⁵⁷. Her great-grandmother Nurjahan is known in history as the inventress of many new kinds of clothing, jewelry and toiletries. Thus it won't be wise to generalize the entire harem, it was a big enough place to accommodate people with different kind of attitudes, likings and personal choices. Within the harem precincts the women were free to lead their lives as per their choice. No one objected to their way of living until it did not challenge the prevalent mores

⁵⁴ Manucci II 1906:318

⁵⁵ Fazal 1993: 78

⁵⁶ Jahangir 1989: 270

⁵⁷ Chopra 1976: 22

and customs.

5.3 Cuisine & Dining Etiquette

Mughals were voracious eaters and loved their food. From Babur to Aurangzeb when Mughal glory was at its peak and even during its fag end when due to scarcity of resources the harem inmates were forced to sleep empty-stomach many times the Royal kitchen remained witness to hectic activity. The imperial kitchen called as *Matbakh*⁵⁸ had a prime position in the zenana. Innumerable varieties of food were prepared in the Royal kitchen by expert cooks coming from different parts of the world. The Royal kitchen was all the more important because it catered to the taste buds of one of the most powerful man on earth- the Emperor of Hindustan. Though the Mughal ladies did not cook their food yet the royal kitchen formed an important part of the imperial family as not only the king's family but also he himself took food there, even the drinking water was subjected to careful scrutiny before being used by the king and other members of the *Shahi* family.

Writing about the imperial kitchen Abul Fazal notes that "Trustworthy and experienced people are appointed to this department...Their head is assisted by the Prime Minister himself ...His Majesty appoints a zealous and sincere man as *Mir Bakawal*, or Master of the Kitchen, upon whose insight the success of the department depends....There are also treasurers for the cash and the stores, several tasters, and a clever writer."⁵⁹

Various Sufiyana or pure vegetarian dishes were prepared in the Royal kitchen like *Zard Birinz*, *Shirbirinj*, *Badinjan*, *Pahit*, *Khichri*, *Sag*, *Thuli*, *Halwa* etc. Names of some rice-meat dishes were: *Qabuli*, *Halim*, *Duzdbiryan*, *Qutab(samosa)*, *Qima Pulao*, *Bughra*, *Qima Shurba*, *Harisa*,. While various pure meat dishes were also prepared like *Malghuba*, *Qaliya*, *Musamman*, *Kabab*, *Yakhni*, *Biryani*, *Dupiyaza* etc.⁶⁰. Many kinds of Indian bread were also prepared called Roti or chapati. All the mughals were very fond of *achaar* (pickles) prepared from seasonal vegetables like *aam*, *nibu*, *chilli*, *garlic*, *ginger*, *aonla* etc. Sweets like *jalebi*, *balushahi*, *khurma*, and *imarti* formed an essential part of everyday

⁵⁸ Fazal 1993: 59

⁵⁹ Fazal 1993: 59

⁶⁰ Nath 1994:93-97

meal. Different *namkeens* were also consumed as snacks during medieval age.

Both men and women of the Royal family were very fond of eating fresh and dried fruits. Both locally available and exotic fruits were relished by members of the imperial household. Among fresh fruits Apples (*seb*), peaches (*shafitalu*), date (*khajur*) and pear (*nashpati*) were most popular and were sent from the colder regions to places like Agra and Delhi. Besides these the Mughals loved to indulge in locally available seasonal fruits like mango (*aam*), banana (*kela*), pomegranate (*anaar*), blackberry (*jamun*), guava (*amrud*), water melon (*tarbuz*), musk melon (*kharbuz*) etc.⁶¹

Since there was always the danger of king being poisoned and after the sad incident of the first Mughal Babur being poisoned by a cook bribed by Ibrahim Lodi's mother, the Mughal kings demonstrated great caution in matters of dining. In fact Akbar avoided dining outside the harem. Extra care was taken in the preparation and serving of meals. A strict action plan was followed right from the procurement of raw material, preparation of the dishes to laying them on the *dastar-khwan*. Recording this procedure thus writes Abul Fazal:

“During the time of cooking and when the victuals are taken out, an awning is spread, and lookers-on kept away. The cooks tuck up their sleeves, and the hems of their garments, and hold their hands before their mouths and noses when the food is taken out; the cook and the Bakawal taste it, after which it is tasted by the Mir Bakawal, and then put into dishes...The Mir Bakawal attaches his seal, and writes on it the names of the contents, whilst the clerk of the pantry writes out on a sheet of paper a list of all vessels and dishes, which he sends inside...that none of the dishes may be changed....The dishes are carried by the Bakawal, the cooks, and the other servants...The servants of the pantry send at the same time, in bags containing the seal of the Bakawal, various kinds of bread, saucers of curds piled up, and small stands containing plates of pickles, fresh ginger, limes and various greens. The servants of the palace again taste the food, spread the table cloth on the ground, and arrange the dishes. After His Majesty has dined the dishes are taken away according to the above list.”⁶²

⁶¹ Nath 1994: 97

⁶² Fazal 1993: 60-61

The women of *zenana* could take food anytime they wanted from morning till night as there was no fixed time for meals. All women including the Rajput wives of the Emperor took meals from the same kitchen but they consumed it in their own apartments. Commenting on it Pelsaert writes, “each wife takes it (food) in her own apartments; for they hate each other secretly, though they seldom or never allow it to be seen, because of their desire to retain the favor of their husband.”⁶³ Tensions and jealousies would understandably have been a part of a polygamous household. However, acute acrimony doesn’t seem likely given the peculiar nature of the harem. For only a woman could understand the other woman’s feelings best. Shelled inside the seraglio, away from their near and dear ones these lovelorn ladies seldom had any one to talk to. Especially old age would have melted away the youthful vigor and ambition. In those solemn lonely hours they would have had no one else to turn to but each other.

We are told that at the start of every year an estimate of annual expenditure of royal kitchen was made by the Sub-treasurers and based on this estimate money was allotted.⁶⁴ Monthly statement of kitchen expenditure was also made which was signed by Mir Bakawal and the writer. It is interesting to note that the choicest items were collected from all parts of the country for the imperial pantry and at the onset of every quarter it was the duty of the Mir Bakawal and *Diwan-i-Bayutat* (Superintendent of stores and workshops) to collect these items. For instance *Sukhdas* rice was procured from *Bharaji* (Bahraich), *Dewzira* rice from Gwalior, *Jinjin* rice came from Rajori and Nimlah, *ghi* was brought from *Hisar Firuza*; ducks, water fowls and some vegetables from kashmir.⁶⁵

We must remember that special attention was paid to the maintenance of proper hygiene and cleanliness during the course of cooking. The meat used for cooking was thoroughly washed before being sent for cooking to the imperial kitchen in sealed bags. Here again it was washed and given into cooking pots. For cooking purpose rain water or water of *Jamna* and *Chenab* was used mixed with some Ganga water. *Bhishties* (water carriers) poured water from their leather bags into earthen pots called *ghadas*. Their mouths were covered

⁶³ Pelsaert 1925: 64-65

⁶⁴ Nath 1994: 83

⁶⁵ Fazal 1993: 60

with cloth to save it from dust and dirt. Akbar paid great attention to arrangement of pure drinking water. To this end he constituted a separate department called *Abdar Khana*.⁶⁶ Ganga water was arranged for his drinking. Men of trust were reposed at the banks of river Ganga to dispatch the water in sealed jars. Water was brought from *Sorun* and *Haridwar*. It was ensured that Akbar only had Ganga water both during his stay at the capital and while travelling. In fact Abul Fazal tells us that on Akbar's instruction *Saltpetre* was used to cool down the water. The price of saltpetre varied from $\frac{3}{4}$ to 4 *mans* per rupee.

In the reign of Akbar the use of ice also became prevalent. It was brought through carriages, by water or by bearers from *Panhan* district,⁶⁷ 45 *kos* from Lahore. It was not easy to carry ice since long distances had to be covered in those days of difficult transportation. Thus the trade of ice had become a profitable business. Akbar's historian mentions in *Ain-I-Akbari* that, "Out of the ten boats employed for the transport of ice, one arrives daily at the capital, each being manned by four boatmen. The ice bundles contain from six to twelve sers, according to the temperature. A carriage brings two loads. There are fourteen stages, where the horses are changed and besides, one elephant is used. Twelve pieces of ten to four sers arrive daily. By this kind of transport, a ser of ice costs in winter 3*d*.21*j*...and in the average, 5*d*.15 $\frac{1}{2}$ *j*. If it is brought by bearers, twenty-eight men are required for the fourteen stages. They bring every day one load, containing four parcels. All ranks use ice in summer; the nobles use it throughout the whole year."⁶⁸

5.4 Love Escapades

In the Indian society a woman's worth is traditionally restricted to being a *good* wife and mother, giving birth to a male child catapulted a woman's status in the harem.⁶⁹ While youth and beauty were short lived and as women lost their appeal at very young age motherhood gave them desired power and authority in the zenana. However, not all women were lucky enough to have children. Then there was the case of spinster princesses who

⁶⁶ Nath 1994: 103

⁶⁷ Fazal 1993: 105

⁶⁸ Fazal 1993: 58

⁶⁹ Lal 1988: 121

were forced to be content with their jewels and wealth and were denied the opportunity of a family life. We should not forget that besides wives, concubines, female servants etc all other female relations of the Emperor also inhabited the Mughal harem. Mothers, grandmothers, aunts, sisters, and daughters formed an invariable part of it. The predominance of sexual activity in the zenana has led many people to assume that the harem inmates led an immoral life shrouded in mystery. Though we can't deny that in a society where women were grossly objectified and were considered *old* at thirty there would have been tremendous pressure on them to retain their position.

It has been recorded that the King tried to be fair in visiting all his wives but at any rate it would have been a daunting task. With the appearance of favorites like Nurjahan and Mumtaz Mahal it would have become all the more difficult for the other co-wives to maintain their position. It must not be discounted either that the contemporary marriage alliances had political motive attached to them with either no or rare love element. All these factors left the young women lonely and disenchanted. While the stronger ones survived weaker one's like Manbai succumbed to the pressures of a polygamous household coupled with ignorance of their husbands. All these conditions prepared a ready ground for secret liaisons and extra-marital affairs. For ironically in those times while the husband was free to have as many women in his life as possible, the women were expected to be faithful to one man.⁷⁰ Hence royal ladies often had secret liaisons though all this happened rather discreetly. Foreign travelers have left behind notorious stories related to women's seclusion and their retaliatory as well as concealed actions in the harem precincts. For instance Pelsaert notes, "These wretched women wear, indeed, the most expensive clothes, eat the daintiest food, and enjoy all worldly pleasures except one, and for that one they grieve, saying they would willingly give everything in exchange for a beggar's poverty."⁷¹ He notes at another place: "mahal women spare no craft or trouble to enable them to enjoy themselves outside."⁷²

Foreign travelers have at length dwelled upon the secret love affairs of harem ladies. For

⁷⁰ Lal 1988: 179

⁷¹ Pelsaert 1925: 66

⁷² Ibid:66

instance Thomas Coryat writes that, “Whatever is brought inside the harem of virile shape, as for instance radishes, so great is the jealousy, and so frequent the wickedness of these people that they are cut and jagged for fear of converting the same to unnatural abuse.”⁷³ It is hard for us to believe that any such silly measures would have been adopted by the Mughals for controlling their women. Given the kind of provisions that have always existed and used as means to handle the demands of a polygamous household. Chanakya for that matter has mentioned the use of *Auparishtakas* in his Arthashastra.⁷⁴ These were artificial tools devised to please women in case of lesbianism or the loss of King’s virility owing to old age or intemperance. However, we do not get any straight mention of unnatural tendencies like lesbianism. Among contemporary authorities Badauni hints at the prevalence of this phenomenon among the Royal ladies.⁷⁵

The foreign travelers have not even shied away from leveling the charge of incest over Shahjahan and his eldest child Jahanara Begum. We will discuss this issue later while taking account of the lives of important yet relatively lesser known occupants of the imperial harem- the spinster princesses. As already mentioned the women did not have any male visitors except their husband. Brothers and fathers were the only male relatives who were given visitation rights provided with some conditions.⁷⁶ So when Nurjahan’s father Ghiyas Begh was given the privilege to frequent the zenana unconditionally it was rightly considered a big honor. We don’t know for sure that how this strictly enforced seclusion effected the overall personality of these women, that whether they were happy with their lot or not, that they aspired the kind of freedom available to the ordinary women or not. Neither any contemporary Persian nor foreign traveler has thrown light on this particular aspect of women’s life within zenana. Even Gulbadan Begum’s *Ahval* fails to apprise us about the sentiments of the harem inmates.

Manucci informs us about the strange antics of harem ladies who for their desire for male society often faked illness. The women never appeared face to face before the physicians they would extend their hand from behind the curtain so that the doctor might feel the pulse.

⁷³ Foster 1921: 278-79

⁷⁴ Nath 1994: 144

⁷⁵ Badauni 1972: 261

⁷⁶ Foster 1921: 230

As per the

Italian traveler's account the women discreetly kissed and bit his hand on many occasions but neither those ladies nor he gave any hint as to what went by.⁷⁷ In fact many interesting tales are told about the occasional tests of doctor's character and integrity. In one such instance for that matter when Manucci extended his hand behind the curtain to feel the patient's pulse the arm appeared thick and hairy. Later he discovered that it was Aurangzeb's son Shah Alam's arm.⁷⁸

Going by the contemporary foreign traveler accounts it seems that zenana was a sexual pleasure- house and not just the Mughal men but also the women were prone to a life of sexual excesses. While the men were free to do and have whatever they wanted the women had to be discreet in their ways. Understandably the Persian chroniclers are silent about such topics hence we invariably have to depend upon the information provided by the foreign travelers from the period. Nevertheless, it is highly desirable to understand the contemporary societal norms and standards of morality before coming to a conclusion. While it seems possible that there would have been a few instances of harem women having secret affairs and liaisons but to generalize the phenomenon would be wrong.⁷⁹ For we know that a variety of women lived inside the harem quarters coming from various ethno-cultural backgrounds and sometimes their pent up frustration might have induced them to indulge in extra-marital affairs. However we should not forget that the religious beliefs of these women were so strong that they would have deterred them from deviation of any kind.

5.5 Education & literary pursuits

During the medieval period the women's education was more or less neglected. Education was confined to the daughters of rich and wealthy people.⁸⁰ For the common Hindu girls primary education was imparted in pathshalas and in Maktabas for Muslims girls. However, the restriction of Purdah rendered education for grown up women impossible. Only those

⁷⁷ Manucci II 1906: 318

⁷⁸ Lal 1988: 181

⁷⁹ Mukerjee 2001:59

⁸⁰ Keay 1938: 80

who could afford private tutors had their daughters educated within the four walls of home. The birth of daughters was not undesired among Mughals and they were raised with love and affection². The first Mughal Babur and his son Humayun had comparatively less time at throne hence they could not do much to the cause of education or women's education for that matter. However, Akbar did not have any formal education himself he made all the necessary arrangements for the literary grooming of all his children. In Fatehpur Sikri some quarters were reserved for educational training of princesses.⁸¹

We have instances of many learned Mughal ladies with high intellectual achievements. Gulbadan Begum, Salima Sultana Begum, Nurjahan, Jahanara, Zeb-un-nisa, Zinat-un-nisa are few notable names in this regard. Female tutors (*Atun*) and aged male teachers formed part of Royal ladies' teaching staff. The chief subjects of study apart from the traditional course in domestic arts were religion, philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, poetry etc.⁸². Religious education formed an integral part of both men and women's training. They were taught to memorize, read, and recite the Quran at a very young age. Aurangjeb's daughter Zebunnisa became a Hafiz at the young age of seven.⁸³ The importance of this feat can be understood by the kind of celebrations that ensued. As the princesses' elated father organized a grand feast for his army to mark the occasion.⁸⁴

There was a huge library called *Shahi Kutubkhana* ⁸⁵ which housed a large number of books. The harem ladies often made use of the books there and satisfied their intellectual and literary needs. Many accounts left by Mughal ladies bear testimony to their literary genius and intellectual ability. Daughter of Babur Gulbadan Begum's *Ahwal-i-Humayun* Badshah is the biography of her brother Humayun. This work has the rare distinction of a historical work written by a woman. Shahjahan's daughter Jahanara wrote the biography of Khwaja Muin-ud-Din Chishti titled *Munis-ul-Arwah* ⁸⁶ Her niece Zeb-un-Nisa can be called the most learned of all the Mughal women, taught by tutors like Hafiza Mariyam and Mulla Said Ashraf Mazindrani. *Zai-un- Munshat* composed by her was a collection of

⁸¹ Havell 1904: 116

⁸² Sarkar 1975: 301

⁸³ Lal 1913:8

⁸⁴ Ibid: 8

⁸⁵ Nath 1994: 166

⁸⁶ Thomas 1964: 323

letters. However, writing poetry remained the favorite pursuit of most Royal ladies. Akbar's wife Salima Sultan Begum, Jahangir's wife Nurjahan, Mumtaz Mahal wife of Shahjahan, his daughter Jahanara, Aurangzeb's daughter Zeb-un-Nisa were all fine poets. Most of these royal ladies adopted the pen name *makhfi* for writing *shayari*. Zinat-un-Nisa was also an expert calligraphist like her father Aurangzeb. She could use many techniques like shikasta, maskh, and nastaliq etc.⁸⁷

Great interest taken by Emperor Akbar in the education of his women is evidenced by the testimony of father Monserrate, who writes, "They are taught to read and write and trained in other ways by matrons."⁸⁸ Besides the king many zenana women also made contribution towards the proliferation of education among the womenfolk. They founded schools, libraries and promptly funded learned scholars of their time. Akbar's foster mother Maham Anaga founded a girl's school in Delhi named Khair-ul-Manzil.⁸⁹ So did Jahanara who founded a Madarsa in Agra. Most ladies patronized authors and learned men of distinction. Nurjahan, Mumtaz Mahal, Jahanara and Zeb-un-nisa's names can be specifically mentioned in this regard. Libraries were founded by few Mughal ladies-Gulbadan Begum,⁹⁰ Salima Sultana Begum and Zeb-un-Nisa had their own libraries.

5.6 Status of Girl Child

The contemporary sources inform us that while birth of a royal son was the cause of celebrations and festivities throughout the Royal court and empire, that of a daughter was marked by celebrations within the zenana only. Mentioning about the immediate ceremonies marking the birth of royal babies Manucci writes:

"The day when a prince or princess is born they give the infant a string of yellow silk with a knot in it, which is a mark of the day he came into the world. The next year, on the same day, they make another knot, and a feast is held as before and thus they continue till the end of life."⁹¹

⁸⁷ Sarkar 1912: 322

⁸⁸ Monserrate 1922: 203

⁸⁹ Husain 1962: 82

⁹⁰ Law 1973: 201-202

⁹¹ Manucci 1906: 323

However, the extent of overall celebrations at birth was different in the case of Mughal boys and girls. In fact when Akbar ordered the observance of celebrations marking birth of one of Jahangir's daughters it was considered against the prevalent custom.⁹² It is no secret that the medieval age was marred by continuous military activity and warfare, women often became helpless victims of enemy's wrath and cruelty. As soon as any fort or citadel fell women became the first victims and had to bear the brunt of enemy's excesses. Loot, arson, molestation, and killing were common in those days. During the medieval age women were carriers of not just their personal honor but the prestige and reputation of their family's honor came to be reposed in them. This gave birth to the Rajput practice of Jauhar. Akbar's ideas on women's chastity were deeply influenced by those of the Rajputs. The perfect seclusion of Mughal women and their anonymity were resultant of this influence. Last but not the least as per the Mughal tradition only men could succeed to the imperial throne hence the birth of a daughter was not desired but once born they were treated with love and respect.

Then there was the Akbari practice of not letting the princesses marry this custom, was strictly followed by both his son and grandson.⁹³ Though we have few occasional instances of Royal princesses getting married during this time. Aurangzeb got few of his daughters married on their request. However, it becomes elaborately clear that daughters had no role in power sharing during Mughal age. We have no instance of any of the children born to Mughal daughters hold any influential position in the empire. Thus we see that apart from the love of their fathers and brothers the Mughals did not have much to give to their daughters. Laden with pearls and rubies they lived a solitary and uneventful life. Only the brightest ones like Jahanara or Zeb-un-nisa could carve a niche for themselves. Is it not strange that despite being good poetesses none of the ladies ever revealed her name and used the general *takhallus* of Makhfi (hidden) as the contemporary mores of decency did not allow women to openly discuss topics like love and romance.⁹⁴ Understandably enough the respective lists of Abul Fazal and Badauni comprising of greatest Persian poets of their

⁹² Fazal 1993: 816

⁹³ Lal 1988: 116

⁹⁴ Ibid: 116

time did not have a single female name.⁹⁵

5.7 The Spinster Mughal Daughters

While going through the pages of Mughal history one comes across names of mighty monarchs and brawny princes and even few mothers and wives form a rare but important part of the historical lore. However, seldom is made mention of Mughal daughters-the beautiful maidens living a life of material comfort and luxury. Born to the mightiest men of their times these women did boast of a distinguished lineage. Nevertheless, was this much sufficient to give them happiness in life? Were they happy or sad? What were their thoughts, desires, and ambitions? We will try to look into this aspect of zenana life from a woman's perspective but not from that of a wife or mother or sister but a daughter. First two Mughals Babur and Humayun both had daughters. Few of them like Gulbadan Begum and Bakhtunnisa Begum daughters of Babur and Humayun respectively went on to play important role in their lives. While Gulbadan's *Ahval* is perhaps the only work of history penned by a Mughal lady, Bakhtunnisa as the Governor of Kabul was the only woman to have ruled in the entire history of Mughals of India.⁹⁶

These women were married and had children as per the prevalent custom. Even Akbar's sisters and daughters were married at the desired age. However, during the reign of Jahangir and his son Shahjahan a strict 'no marriage' policy was adopted with regards to the Mughal princesses barring a few stray incidents like the marriage of Akbar's son Murad's daughter to his nephew Parvez⁹⁷ and that of Daniyal's daughter to Mirza Wali⁹⁸. Likewise during later days only two out of many daughters of Aurangjeb got married so did the daughter of Dara Shukoh named Jani Begum. Many sources have held Akbar responsible for this policy while few contend otherwise. Manucci says: "Akbar bequeathed to his descendants the rule not to give their daughters in marriage. This rule remained in force up to the time of Aurangjeb, who gave his daughters in marriage upon their insistence."⁹⁹

⁹⁵ Fazal 1993: 617-680

⁹⁶ Monserrate 1922: 153

⁹⁷ Jahangir 1989: 1.81

⁹⁸ Ibid: 2.91

⁹⁹ Findly 1993: 2.175-77

His statement has been corroborated by Peter Mundy: "Great Mogolls or kings daughters are never suffered to marrie, being an ancient custom."¹⁰⁰ Although nowhere in history it has been specifically mentioned that Akbar had issued any such ordinance as to disallow the marriage of royal princesses. However his disapproval of marriages between first cousins is well known but that had a scientific reason.¹⁰¹ For the reasons of consanguinity the off springs of such union were not supposed to be born healthy. For instance the first wife of Jahangir was his mother's niece Manbai the result of this alliance was the unfortunate Khusrau. Islam for that matter does not object but encourages marriages for reasons of consanguinity.

In fact Akbar married his own sisters and daughters to suitable candidates. His daughters Bakhshi Banu Begum, Aram Banu, Shahzada Khanum and Shahr-un-Nisa were all married. So was his step-sister Sakina Banu Begum. In fact as per the dictate of Muslim religion widow remarriages were also quite common in those days as we have many such instances in recorded history. Humayun's daughter Fakr-un-Nisa was remarried after her first husband's death. Akbar himself married the widow of his regent Bairam Khan named Salima Sultan Begum. Thus the princesses' spinsterhood cannot be ascribed to Akbar. Anyhow by the time of Akbar's son and grandson the rule of not marrying the Mughal princesses came to be firmly established. Many reasons can be cited for this policy chief among them was the unavailability of suitable match for the Royal daughters. No one was perhaps found worthy of the hand of these ladies except the near cousins but the long drawn wars of succession had literally rendered the Mughal house bereft of male descendants.¹⁰²

However, many eligible bachelors belonging to noble families were always there but the problem lay in the fear of these royal sons-in-law becoming possible claimants to the throne and adding more competition to the highly contested succession issue. So noted Bernier, "the marriage of a princess is of rare occurrence in Hindoustan, no man being considered worthy of royal alliance; an apprehension being entertained that the husband might thereby be rendered powerful, and induced perhaps to aspire to the crown"¹⁰³ Then some of the

¹⁰⁰ Ibid:2.202-3

¹⁰¹ Fazal 1993: 677

¹⁰² Lal 1988: 117

¹⁰³ Bernier 1934: 12

nobles too on their part were not overtly desirous of marrying royal princesses since there was always the fear of getting controlled by a more dominating partner. Not to forget the King's (father or brother of bride) superiority getting compromised in front of the groom and his family. This was unfathomable to the pride of the great Mughals.¹⁰⁴ Whatever be their reasons but it is certain that a large number of Mughal daughters suffered on account of this atrocious rule.

All the Mughals loved their daughters dearly and raised them with love and affection like their sons. However, as mentioned earlier there was a decided difference between the upbringing of a prince and princess. While the princes were possible heirs to the throne the daughters were obliged to live a life of seclusion in the harem bereft of any chance at power and later were even denied the right to marry. Perhaps the political compulsions were so strong in those days that fatherly or brotherly emotions took a backseat. Jahanara for instance was promised by her brother Dara that on his accession to the Mughal throne he will get her married. However, it was Aurangzeb and not Dara who was destined for the throne. Curiously Aurangzeb had two of his own female children named Mehrunnisa and Zabt-un-Nisa married to his nephews, sons of his late brothers Dara Shukoh and Murad Bakhsh. While Dara's daughter Jahanzeb Banu better known as Jani Begum was married off to Aurangzeb's son Azam.¹⁰⁵ But these were rare happy endings in a general saga of pain and melancholy.

By the time of Aurangzeb the bad results of this practice were strongly felt. So much so that Aurangzeb himself expressed his grief about this practice in a letter written to his son Kam Baksh. In this letter he talked about the sad plight of one of his daughters from Udaipuri Mahal named Hijat-un-Nisa who was unhappy for her life. Many beautiful and talented Mughal princesses like Jahanara, Roshanara, Zinat-un-Nisa, Zeb-un-Nisa had to suffer on account of this rule. We will now undertake a detailed study of the lives of few of these ladies to get an insight into their private world.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid: 117

¹⁰⁵ Lal 1988: 120

5.7.1 Jahanara Begum

Born on 23rd March 1614 she was the eldest child of Shahjahan and his wife Mumtaz Mahal¹⁰⁶ Destined for a long and eventful life she was the favorite child of her father. Popularly known, as Begum Sahab Jahanara was elevated to the position of Padshah Begum after the early death of her mother. Manucci describes her as “most lovely, discreet, loving, generous, open minded and charitable.”¹⁰⁷ Tutored by her mother’s lady in waiting Sati-un-Nisa Khanum she grew into a fine and cultured lady. Barely sixteen years old at the time of her mother’s death big responsibility fell on the tender shoulders of the young princess. However she fulfilled all her duties with perfect candor and dignity. She not only gave motherly affection and love to all her younger siblings but also provided solace to her father who was left devastated by the death of his beloved wife. Jahanara was liked by his father and brothers in spite of her openly siding with eclectic Dara against puritanical Aurangzeb in the war of succession. In fact Shahjahan’s other daughters too had taken sides during the war of succession. While Jahanara was favorably disposed towards Dara Shukoh, Roshanara supported Aurangzeb and Gauharara was on Murad’s side.¹⁰⁸

Jahanara Begum faithfully nursed her ailing and old father during his seven years of captivity (1658-1666). Thus fulfilling the duties of a good daughter and princess but amidst all this activity the tragedy of her personal life, her loneliness, and sorrow can’t be overlooked. It is said that during her youth Dara had even persisted with his father Shahjahan for the marriage of Jahanara and brought forth the proposal of a noble named Nizabat Khan but his maternal uncle Shaista Khan objected to this alliance because of Nijabat Khan’s close relations with the king of Balkh and given the history of sweet and sour Mughal relations with that region this alliance was considered inappropriate.¹⁰⁹ Then there was the case of one Nazr Khan whom Jahanara was rumored to be in love with. But Shahjahan himself is said to have declined this proposal owing to his dislike for the Persian nobleman.¹¹⁰ Manucci informs us that these developments led Dara to promise his sister that on his accession he would get her married. Of this assurance so writes

¹⁰⁶ Lasky 2002:3

¹⁰⁷ Manucci 1906: 216

¹⁰⁸ Nath 1994: 151

¹⁰⁹ Lal 1988: 91

¹¹⁰ Bernier 1934: 12

Bernier, "This pledge was a remarkable one, the marriage of a princess being of rare occurrence in Hindustan, no man being considered worthy of royal alliance, an apprehension being entertained that the husband might thereby be rendered powerful, and induced perhaps to aspire to the crown."¹¹¹

Anyhow Jahanara was to remain unmarried all her life. We are now to deal with the gravest scandal of Mughal history-the alleged incestuous relationship between Shahjahan and his daughter Jahanara. This charge bred from the deep love and affection that Shahjahan had for his daughter who fully reciprocated his sentiments. Corroborating to this statement Bernier writes, "Shahjahan reposed unbounded confidence in this his favorite child; she watched over his safety, and was so cautiously observant that no dish was permitted to appear on the Royal table which had not been prepared under her superintendence."¹¹². In the entire extent of Mughal empire spanning more than two centuries no Mughal ruler except Shahjahan has been accused of such a notorious allegation. For despite his reputation as a womanizer and philanderer it is difficult to imagine him maintaining immoral relations with his own child. In fact this has been one of the most contentious issues of Mughal history.

While no cotemporary Indian authority has written in support of this allegation, which is quite obvious because of their allegiance to the throne, many foreign travelers have recorded this scandal in detail. Among modern writers and scholars of History there are two contradictory schools of thought regarding this allegation. While few have supported the incest theory others have refuted it outright.¹¹³ Banarsi Prasad Saxena who is considered an authority over Shahjahan contends no "confirmatory evidence"¹¹⁴ can be found with regards to this scandal or many others related to Shahjahan's character. However, he maintains that it would be wrong to blindly believe all the statements of European travelers. For that matter Peter Mundy tells us about a relationship of similar nature developing between Shahjahan and his daughter Chamni Begum.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ Ibid:12

¹¹² Bernier 1934:12

¹¹³ Beale 1910: 190

¹¹⁴ Saksena 1968:337

¹¹⁵ Saksena 1968: 337

Among foreign travelers De laet was the first one to charge Shahjahan with incest followed by Peter Mundy, Bernier and Tavernier. Accusing Shahjahan of immoral relations with his daughter Bernier writes, "Begum Sahib the elder daughter of Shahjahan was very handsome and of lively parts. Rumor has it that his attachment reached a point, which it is difficult to believe, the justification of which he rested on the decision of the Mullas, or doctors of their law. According to them it would have been unjust to deny the king the privilege of gathering fruits from the tree he himself had planted."¹¹⁶ It is quite interesting to note that Manucci has strongly contradicted any such assertions. This is quite uncharacteristic of a person like him who otherwise dishes out many titillating Royal scandals. In fact he has narrated many unsavory stories about the respective love lives of Shahjahan and Jahanara.

Strongly opposing Bernier's stand on this issue Manucci observes that "(Bernier) puts many things of his own into the Moghul history...He writes many things which did not occur.....nor could have been well informed, for he did not live more than eight years at the Moghul court.....Nor could he so observe, because he had no entrance to court."¹¹⁷ V.A.Smith for that matter relying upon the testimony of the likes of De laet and Thomas Herbert neither accepts nor summarily rejects the monstrous charges leveled against the creator of the Taj. Interestingly he tells us about the Boers of Africa who indulged in such practices and designates the possible time for the supposed crime soon after the death of Mumtaz Mahal. As far as De Laet's observations are concerned his work was not an original but only a compilation translated by Hoyland and Banerjee. The opponents of incest theory like Beale have heaped praises on Jahanara for her devotion and service to her father. He writes,"(Her) name will ever adorn the pages of history as a bright example of filial attachment....(She) not only supported her aged father in adversity, but voluntarily resigned her liberty and resided with him during his imprisonment in the fort of Agra."¹¹⁸

Another author named Richard Temple dismisses the possibility of any incestuous relation between Jahanara and her father calling it the result of Indian tendency to criticize people

¹¹⁶ Saksena 1968: 337

¹¹⁷ Manucci 1906: 75-76

¹¹⁸ Beale 1910: 190)

holding positions of power. Owing to Shahjahan's ill-reputation as a womanizer and the many favors showered by him on his daughter people found the chance to circulate such malicious stories.¹¹⁹ We must not lose sight of the fact that Aurangjeb was himself interested in the promotion and spread of such rumors maligning the image of his father and sister who had once been the supporters of unfortunate Dara in the war of succession against him. In fact a supporter of incest charge Tavernier himself notes, "He (Aurangjeb) caused his sister to be confined in the fortress that she might keep company of the king, whom she dearly loved."¹²⁰

Thus after a careful perusal of the entire episode we may conclude that the horrendous charge of incest was founded on Shahjahan's reckless sexual life, his unbounded love for his daughter, mean mentality of courtiers and last but not the least Aurangzeb's personal interest in spread of such rumors thereby maligning the images of his father and sister. His hatred for Shahjahan is well known while Jahanara's open support of Dara in the war of succession had rendered her disfavored by the new king. Under such circumstances slander was the easiest and most deadly weapon available to Aurangjeb against his helpless father and sister. In fact Banarsi Prasad Saxena who is considered the biggest authority on Shahjahan summarily dismisses any charge of incest leveled against Jahanara and her father.¹²¹

We know Jahanara not only extremely pitiful and charitable but the mistress of great wealth also. Like other Royal ladies she had for her personal income revenue of jagirs allotted to her, which included among others Achbal and Vernag in Kashmir, Doraha, Panipat in Punjab among others. Being close to her father Jahanara was showered with gifts and offerings from all sides by people who wanted to win the Emperor's favor. Indian as well as foreign authorities wanted her support and goodwill to get their works done or to gain proximity to the throne. Begum Sahab's numerous negotiations added both to her coffers and reputation. Raja Prithvichand of Srinagar(Garhwal)¹²² and Qutb Shah of Golconda¹²³

¹¹⁹ Temple 1915: 24

¹²⁰ Tavernier 1925: 344

¹²¹ Saxena 1968:338

¹²² Qanungo 1952: 136-37

¹²³ Sarkar 1912: 239

for instance sought her assistance for gaining forgiveness from Shahjahan on separate occasions. The princess was lavishly paid in return for her assistance. Jahanara engaged herself in trade activities also and amassed much wealth in this manner. She maintained a large fleet of ships, which carried on trade with other countries and sourced her huge income. Going by Manucci's account her annual income was estimated at thirty lakh rupees and other gems and jewels.¹²⁴

Even after the ultimate loss of Dara in the war of succession and his subsequent execution by Aurangzeb, not much changed in the status and position of Jahanara Begum. This proves beyond doubt that she was a tactful lady who knew to keep her opponents pleased with her. Perhaps this was the reason behind Aurangzeb's retaining his elder sister as the first lady of the realm till her death in 1681.¹²⁵ In fact forgetting the long drawn years of tension and mutual hostility Aurangzeb was gracious enough to decorate Jahanara with the title of *Sahibat-uz-Zamani* after her death.¹²⁶ Though Begum Sahab was religiously inclined right from an early age but the death of her father left her aggrieved and lonely. This made her take more keen interest in religious matters. Besides composing works of literary merit on religious topics she wrote brochures on Sufi philosophy. After her death she was buried in the compound of Nizam-ud-Din Auliya's *Dargaah*. Thus reads the epitaph engraved on Jahanara's tomb:

"Baghair sabza na poshad kase mazar mara

Ki qabr posh ghariban hamin gayah basast"

The English translation of the original Persian verse reads as under:

"Let nothing cover my grave except the green grass,

For the green turf is covering enough for the poor."¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Manucci 1906: 216

¹²⁵ Sarkar 1912: 36

¹²⁶ *ibid*:38

¹²⁷ Lal 1988: 98

5.7.2 Roshanara

Born on 2nd September 1617 Roshanara Begum was the second daughter of Emperor Shahjahan¹²⁸ Rivalry between princes has been a constant and recurring feature of Mughal polity but the kind of animosity that cropped up between Jahanara and Roshanara born from the same mother has no parallel in the entire range of Mughal annals. While Roshanara lacked the beauty, charm and intelligence of her elder sister¹²⁹ she is known to have been vivacious and active. While Shahjahan always doted upon his first born child it was not to be the fate of Roshanara. The war of succession among the four sons of Shahjahan had left the Mughal family divided in two halves. While on the one hand were Dara supported by his father Shahjahan and sister Jahanara on the other side there was Aurangzeb supported by Roshanara. She not only secretly apprised her younger brother about all the proceedings at the court but also unlike her sister tried her best to avert any chances of conciliation between the warring parties.¹³⁰

Hamilton writes about her that, “she was a woman of great genius and vivacity, she fish out all the designs of her father and brothers, and acquainted Aurangzeb with them by letters, and promised her assistance to set him on the throne.”¹³¹ Naturally on his accession Aurangzeb unboundedly rewarded Roshanara for the support given during the war of succession. However she is known in history as a cruel, cunning, and ruthless woman. What else can be written about the woman who not only advocated execution of her elder brother Dara Shukoh¹³² but remorselessly celebrated the same by organizing a grand feast. For sometime after Aurangzeb’s accession Roshanara reveled in a life of luxury and comfort thus taking revenge on her sister who languished in captivity at Agra fort along with her father.

However situations took a quick turn in 1662 when Aurangzeb was gripped by severe fever, his condition deteriorated fast and it was speculated in the Royal circles that another war of succession was in the offing. The manipulative Roshanara tried to gain

¹²⁸ Jahangir 1989: 389

¹²⁹ Bernier 1934:14

¹³⁰ Sarkar 1912: 314

¹³¹ Hamilton 1930: 101

¹³² Bernier 1934: 100

control of the state affairs by seizing the Royal seal first and then started pursuing the cause of Aurangzeb's third son Azam instead of the elder Muazzam for the throne. She even wrote letters to the important nobles regarding the imminent succession issue and requested their support for Azam.¹³³ Roshanara even reportedly misbehaved with Muazzam and said to have pulled his mother by her hair and thrown her out of sick Aurangzeb's chamber. All this created confusion and chaos in the Mughal family and empire.

However Aurangzeb recovered from his illness and came to know about Roshanara's antics. The first thing he did on recovering from his illness was to get back the royal seal from his conniving sister¹³⁴ Hence onwards Roshanara fell in her brother's eyes¹³⁵ but owing to the support she had lent him during the war of succession Aurangzeb forgave her at least outwardly. Roshanara's illicit affairs are said to have distanced the once close brother and sister further. However, for the shrewd man that Aurangzeb was he did not let her sister get wind of his changed attitude towards her. In fact he decorated Roshanara Begum with the title of Shah Begum in 1669, two years before her mysterious death in 1671. Many people ascribe her death due to poison given at Aurangzeb's orders. Anyhow after her death her mortal remains were interred in the Roshanara Bagh constructed by her at Delhi. However, her death led to the reversal of fortune for her elder sister as Aurangzeb reinstated her as the Padshah Begum, the post she was to retain till her death in 1681.

Like the custom of those times both Jahanara and Roshanara lived a life of luxury and ease. Being daughters of the mighty Mughal nothing on earth was left wanting for them. At least all their material desires and needs were fulfilled in the first place. Perhaps this was the way to compensate for the loneliness that they had to bear out of the cruel Mughal practice of not letting the Royal daughters get married. They wore the costliest clothes, decorated themselves with the best jewels and cosmetics, travelled in grand processions, ate the daintiest food, did unbounded charity, and constructed magnificent

¹³³ Sarkar 1912: 59

¹³⁴ Bernier 1934: 125

¹³⁵ Mathur 1964: 49

buildings. Thus balancing the desires of this world and fulfilling duties of the other. After his recovery from illness Aurangjeb intended to visit Kashmir, many people credit Roshanara Begum for this enterprise for it was she who wanted to enjoy the same kind of pompous travel procession, as her sister would do in her heydays. Thus she wanted to “appear in her turn among a pompous and magnificent army, as her sister Begum Saheb had done during the reign of Shahjahan”, writes Bernier.¹³⁶ At the time of this sojourn Roshanara was in her late forties thus much past her prime but the desire for luxury and pomp had not gone away. Thus we notice that luxury and stylish living were at the heart of these princesses old or young. Writing about this journey Bernier notes, “stretch imagination to its utmost limits and you can conceive no exhibition more grand and imposing than when Roshanara Begum mounted on a stupendous Pegu elephant and seated in a *Mikedembar*, blazing with gold and azure, is followed by five or six other elephants ...nearly as resplendent as her own and filled with ladies attached to her household.”¹³⁷

5.7.3 Zeb-un-Nisa

Zeb-un-Nisa was the eldest daughter of Aurangjeb born from Dilras Banu Begum.¹³⁸ Told to be a fair maiden this princess had a versatile temper. She was highly educated and excelled as a fine poetess. As per the contemporary practice she wrote with the pen name makhfi. Given below is one fine example of her verse composition:

“When from my cheek I
lift my veil, The roses
turn with envy pale”¹³⁹

Her life is a saga of broken dreams and unfulfilled desires. She had been affianced to Sulaiman Shukoh, son of her uncle Dara. However, due to the consequent war of

¹³⁶ Bernier 1934: 125

¹³⁷ Bernier 1934: 372

¹³⁸ Lal 1988: 117

¹³⁹ Macnicol, 1932: 77

succession and the execution of Dara coupled with poisoning of Sulaiman Shukoh rendered this alliance improbable. There were few other suitors as well like the son of Shah Abbas II of Iran named Mirza Farukh. It is recorded in history that how the self-respecting princess had first wanted to meet the prince and ascertain if he was good enough to be her spouse. During this rendezvous the Persian prince in a play of words asked for a sweet, which actually meant a kiss. Greatly offended by this behavior Zeb-un-Nisa refused to marry the Mirza. We are told by few sources about Zebunnisa's liking for Maratha chief Shivaji and the help she lent in his escape from Agra.¹⁴⁰ Many other love affairs of the princess find mention in the pages of history though the veracity of these stories cannot be proved.¹⁴¹ Though Zeb-un-Nisa was not lucky in love but this could not deter her spirit as she would compose sweet poetry:

*“Ay abshar nauhagar az behr
kesti, Chin bar jabin fagunda
ra andoh kesti, Ayacha dard
bud ki chun ma tamam shab,
Sar ra sang mi zadi wa mi garesti.”¹⁴²*

The English translation of this Persian couplet is as follows:

Oh waterfall; for whose sake art thou weeping?
In whose sorrowful recollections has thou wrinkled thy
brow? What pain was it that impelled thee, like
myself, the whole night, To strike thy head against
stone and to shed tears.

Like the other members of the Mughal family Zeb-un-Nisa had also constructed her own

¹⁴⁰ Devee 1918: 77-78

¹⁴¹ Ansari 1983: 89

¹⁴² Lal 1988: 118

mausoleum during her lifetime at village Nawankot, Lahore but as fate would have it she was forced to spend the last twenty years of her life confined in a Delhi prison.(1681 A.D.-1702 A.D.)It so happened that during the rebellion of prince Akbar against his father Aurangjeb she chose to side with her brother. Somehow Aurangjeb got wind of this , deeply offended and enraged he not only seized all her property and assets but imprisoned her in the fort of Salimgarh (Delhi) where she died a sorry death in 1702.¹⁴³ Today this once favorite daughter of Aurangjeb lies buried in the precincts of Zinat-ul-Masjid in Delhi.¹⁴⁴

5.7.4 Zinat-un-Nisa

She was the princess who constructed the *Kumari Masjid* from the amount of dowry that would have been given to her had she been married. She was accorded the status of Padshah Begum by her father Aurangjeb. Zinat-un-Nisa used to head her father's harem during his sojourn in the Deccan.¹⁴⁵ After her death she was buried in this mosque, we can get to know her better through the epitaph etched on her grave that she herself had worded:

“In my grave the grace of God is my only help

It is enough if the shadow of the cloud of mercy covers my tomb.”

It is enough if the shadow of the cloud of mercy covers my tomb. A kind and pious lady, Zinat-un-Nisa Begum had been given the charge of deceased Maratha King Shambhaji's wife Yesu Bai and her son Shahu. whom she protected from her father's fury many a times besides facilitating their release from the Mughal camp during Balaji Vishwanath's campaign to free Shahuji from Mughal captivity in 1718.

¹⁴³ Saqi 1947: 126

¹⁴⁴ Khan 1954: 51-52

¹⁴⁵ Mukerjee 2001:156 3 Lal 1988 :120

5.8 Festivals & Fairs

5.8.1 Nauroz

Nauroz was basically a court festival, which marked the New Year celebrations. Originally a Persian function it marked great happiness and festivities. During this festival music, dance and

drinks would keep the audience entertained for full eighteen days.¹⁴⁶ However women could not directly participate in these festivities and could only watch from behind the veiled enclosures. Hence this festival of Nauroz was not that important from the point of view of the harem inmates.

5.8.2 Meena Bazar / Khushroz

Unlike Nauroj the festival of Khushroz was an all-women's affair that became famous as Meena Bazar during Shahjahan's time. This was basically both a fair as well as a bazaar, which was held every month for the harem ladies.¹⁴⁷ Though Khushroz was celebrated prior to Akbar's reign it got institutionalized like many other practices during his time. The basic purpose of this fair was to provide the harem inmates the opportunity of doing shopping within the zenana precincts.¹⁴⁸ At both Fatehpur Sikri palace complex as well as the Agra fort these fairs were organized during Akbar's reign. The fair had become quite a resplendent affair by the time of Akbar's grandson Shahjahan. Only women were invited to this bazaar where they would put up stalls of different kinds of precious commodities on this occasion. The King accompanied by the ladies of the harem acted as buyers. Amidst fun and frolic buying and selling of articles would take place with the king and his women haggling over supposed high price of the commodities on sale.¹⁴⁹

However the Khushroz or Mina Bazaar is said to have served the hidden objective of

¹⁴⁶ Ahmad 1927: 559

¹⁴⁷ Fazal 1993: 24

¹⁴⁸ Fazal 1993: 287

¹⁴⁹ Lal 1988: 166-167

fulfilling the lust of the Emperor. While Badauni hints at the same in his Muntakhab. Foreign travelers like Manucci¹⁵⁰ and Bernier¹⁵¹ accuse Shahjahan of the same in their respective accounts. In any case the role of this bazaar-cum-fair in serving as a great source of enjoyment and fun to the inmates of the zenana is beyond any doubt. The entry of Hindu women in the Mughal harem led to the celebration of Hindu festivals of Holi, Diwali,¹⁵² Rakshabandhan and Janmashtami amidst great fervor and enthusiasm. Out of these festivals Holi was most enthusiastically celebrated in the Mughal harem. Various paintings from the period testify to the merriment and joy with which the festival of colors was celebrated in the Mughal seraglio.

5.8.3 Marriages

In the polygamous Mughal household marriage celebrations were a recurring feature. The women of the zenana eagerly participated in all the marriage related activities.¹⁵³ The senior wives and other ladies gave instructions, which were readily followed by the junior wives and other ladies of the harem. The giving of betel (Pan) by the senior members of bride's family was considered as a sign of acceptance of marriage proposal. *Hennabandi* a close equivalent of modern Mehndi ceremony came next. As part of this ritual henna was applied to the hands and feet of the bridegroom. The day of wedding was marked by great festivities as the marriage procession with the groom seated on a lofty elephant came to the bride's place. After the performance of the marriage ceremony gold and silver coins were showered on the new couple.¹⁵⁴ The pages of history are filled with numerous such instances when marriages were celebrated at grand and lavish scale.

Marriage of Jahangir's son Prince Khurram with the daughter of Asaf Khan and Nurjahan's niece Arjumand Banu was a visual spectacle. Held in 1612 this marriage was a magnificently celebrated affair. Exclusive feasts were organized and costly presents were given on this occasion. The festivities continued till after a month of the

¹⁵⁰ Manucci 1906: 195

¹⁵¹ Bernier 1934: 272

¹⁵² Fazal 1993: 226

¹⁵³ Mukerjee 2001: 104

¹⁵⁴ Mathur 1964: 42-43

Royal wedding.¹⁵⁵ We have instances of many such extravagant Royal marriages from the Mughal period. Most notable among them are the marriages of Dara Shukoh with Nadira Begum; Shahjahan's second son Shuja's marriage with Mirza Rustam Safawi's daughter; Aurangzeb's marriage with Dilras Banu Begum etc.

The senior ladies took upon the responsibility of smooth solemnization of all marriage related ceremonies. For instance proceedings of Dara Shukoh's marriage were overseen by his sister Jahanara. Likewise during Shuja's marriage Jahanara again shouldered all the responsibilities. While another of Shahjahan's daughter Gauhar Ara was responsible for the marriage of Dara's son Siphir Shukoh and Aurangzeb's daughter Zubdat-un-Nisa.¹⁵⁶ The Mughal weddings were a testament to the grandeur and style of the great Mughals who generously spent on the occasion. A special part of these celebrations were the grand feasts which were given on these occasions. As for the ladies of the harem these marriages were occasions of great merriment, classic fun and enjoyment.

5.8.4 Emperor's Birthday

Among the numerous festivals and celebrations that formed part of the Imperial calendar was the occasion of the sovereign's birthday¹⁵⁷ Akbar began the practice of performing the *Tuladan* ceremony by which was meant the weighing of the Emperor against valuable commodities. Tuladan was an ancient Hindu practice, which had been liberally borrowed by Akbar like many other native practices. While the King was weighed twice a year on both solar and lunar birthdays, the other important male members of the Royal family like King's sons and grandsons were weighed only once.¹⁵⁸ Abul Fazal tells us in his Ain that "His Majesty is weighed twelve times against the following articles: gold, quicksilver, silk, perfumes, copper, drugs, *ghi*, iron, rice-milk, seven kinds of grain, salt etc."¹⁵⁹ Alms were given, animals were set free and criminals were also pardoned on this happy occasion. This occasion was of great importance to the harem as the items against which the King was weighed were sent from the harem by the Queen mother

¹⁵⁵ Qazwini ff.48b-49b

¹⁵⁶ Khan 1947: 47

¹⁵⁷ Lal 1988: 137

¹⁵⁸ Fazal 1993: 277

¹⁵⁹ Ibid : 277

herself and sometimes the Tuladan would take place in her chamber. The practice of Tuladan was retained by Akbar's successors also. Even during the reign of puritan Aurangzeb this practice continued unabated. In fact at the time of a child's birth a chord was kept in the harem and on every successive birthday a knot was tied to it, hence came into use the term *salgirah* or the year's knot.¹⁶⁰

5.8.5 Women as Organizers of Feasts and Celebrations

Senior women of the Mughal household were solely responsible for organization of feasts, marriages, festivals and other such grand occasions. It is on record that both Maham and Khanzada Begum organized grand feasts. Gulbadan Begum in her *Ahval* gives a detailed account of Maham Begum's day to day activities and her organization of feasts. One such description of Gulbadan can be cited here as an example :

“A jeweled throne, ascended by four steps and above it gold embroidered hangings, and laid on it a cushion and pillows embroidered in gold. The covering of the pavilions and of the large audience tent was, inside, European brocade, and outside, Portuguese cloth. The tent poles were gilded; that was very ornamental.(My lady)had prepared a tent-lining and a *kannat* and *sar-i- kannat* of Gujrati cloth of gold, and a ewer for rose-water and candlesticks, and drinking vessels, and rose-water sprinklers- all of jeweled gold.”¹⁶¹

Gulbadan also notes the exemplary effort put by Khanzada Begum in the arrangement of her nephew Hindal's wedding. In fact along with this feast, Humayun's accession to the throne was also commemorated with another feast. It is interesting to note that special attention was paid to the minutest of details like the seating arrangement, order of events (Humayun's accession feast preceded Hindal's marriage banquet), guests were taken care of. Those women who acquired senior status owing to age, motherhood or king's preference performed a variety of roles in the world of Mughal harem. They organized feasts,¹⁶² prepared for marriages, festivals and other such celebratory

¹⁶⁰ Lal 1988: 137

¹⁶¹ Beveridge 1997: 113

¹⁶² Lal 2005: 138

occasion. Fixing their children's marriages and encouraging younger wives for procreation, thus ensuring the continuance of Chingizi-Timurid line, was the most important role that they played.

This was all the more important in the time of Babur and Humayun when the Mughal rule was in a nascent state and there was constant fear of enemies (while to Babur Uzbeks posed the biggest threat, Afghans challenged Humayun), in such circumstances it was essential to work upon the enhancement of Khandan. Earnestness of Humayun's mother Maham Begum, to see her son have children (more so sons) is a pointer in this direction.¹⁶³ Sometimes these women acquired the authority to guide their sons / grandsons in state affairs as seems the case with Aisan Daulat Begum, Qutluq Nigar Khanum and Khanzada Begum.

5.9 Amusements & Pastimes

To the modern mind the life of harem inmates might be a ceaseless round of monotony and boredom much like that of a bird in a golden cage. Surrounded by innumerable servants and attendants at their beck and call who would have not only spared them of strains of any kind of physical activity like cleaning, sweeping, cooking etc. but also given them long hours of boredom.¹⁶⁴ In fact even for the tending and care of young royal babies there were many nurses. To an extent this is true also but that has always been the case with the rich and affluent. Their lives and conduct is always different from those of the common people. Hence it won't be fair to ostracize them for the luxuries that they had. Now naturally arises the curiosity to know that besides always trying to look young and beautiful, gossiping, conspiring, or sulking¹⁶⁵ over the loneliness of their lives what else did these ladies do to fill the long and empty hours of their lives. Many forms of indoor as well as outdoor activities and games were there to keep them occupied and entertained. We will take them up one by one and try to understand the entertainment routine of Royal ladies.

¹⁶³ Lal 2005: 120

¹⁶⁴ Nath 1994: 154

¹⁶⁵ Lal 1988:125

5.9.1 Indoor Activities

5.9.1.1 Games

The women of harem amused themselves by playing different kind of games ranging from *Shatranj* (chess) to *chaupar*, *chandal-mandal*, *taash* (cards) etc. Akbar was himself very fond of playing these indoor games¹⁶⁶ and this might have led to their becoming popular with the Mughal women. The game of chess was very popular among royalty and both men and women played it with great interest. The chess board was divided into 64 squares with sixteen *muhra*s on both the sides. We are told by certain sources that Akbar got made a huge platform in the shape of a chessboard at the *Pachisi* courtyard in Fatehpur Sikri. Real women were used as chessmen who would move as per the bidding of the Emperor and his chess mate.¹⁶⁷ Jahangir and his son Shahjahan played shatranj with their womenfolk. The Mughal paintings vividly depict the harem inmates playing this game of great intellectual merit among them.

Chaupar or Pachisi was another popular and often played game among the harem inmates perhaps because it was less complicated and enjoyable than chess. The love of Aurangzeb's daughter Zeb-un-Nisa for this game is well known.¹⁶⁸ Mughal emperor Akbar is known to have played this game with slave-girls just like chess. Four players played this game with two pairing against the other two. Perhaps because of its easy rules and no-fuss nature this game became a favorite with zenana ladies. There was another game invented during Akbar's time called as chandal mandal. There were sixteen parallelograms in this game arranged around the center in circular form. Up to sixteen players could play this game in twelve different ways. Thus this was a good group game.¹⁶⁹ *Ganjifa* (cards) was another loved game of the Mughal women. It differed from the modern version of the game as all the cards consisted of pictures. The best part about these games was that they gave the players ample entertainment within the confines of harem unlike outdoor activities like shooting, excursions and picnics

¹⁶⁶ Fazal 1993: 315-20

¹⁶⁷ Lal 1988: 126

¹⁶⁸ Sarkar 1975: 82

¹⁶⁹ Fazal 1993: 316-318

which needed the women to move out of the seraglio.

Other Forms of Indoor Activity

Besides playing different kinds of indoor games to keep them both entertained and occupied the Mughal ladies enjoyed cultural activities like music and dance. All Mughal emperors except

Aurangzeb were fond of it and thus it formed an important part of harem life.¹⁷⁰ It must be noted that when female entertainers performed at the court the Royal ladies were allowed to watch their performance from behind screened apartments. For the exclusive service of Mughal ladies there was an entourage of skilled singers and dancers in the imperial harem also. Reading was another favored pastime of the harem inmates as most of the ladies were educated and well-read they appreciated the works of poetry and romance. Few famous contemporary works were *Alif Laila*, *Nal Daman*, *Tuti Nama*, *Gulistan*, *Bostan*, *Singhasan Battisi* etc.¹⁷¹ Mughal ladies like Gulbadan Begum, Nurjahan, Jahanara, Zeb-un-Nisa were fine writers and composed works of very high literary merit. Painting, embroidery and watching fireworks were other popular means of Mughal harem's amusement.

Going by the description of Italian traveler Niccolao Manucci it becomes clear that the amusement activities of Mughal women were chiefly confined to the harem quarters only. "They have the permission to enjoy the pleasure of the comedy and dance, to listen to talks and stories of love, to recline upon beds of flower, to walk about in the gardens, to listen to the murmuring of the running waters, to hear singing and other pastimes."¹⁷² However females of the Mughal household went out of the harem quarters to participate in garden parties and picnics. Emperor's like Jahangir and Shahjahan enjoyed strolling in the garden with their female companions. Shahjahan had laid out many gardens to serve as pleasure retreats. Special provisions of privacy and security were made to

¹⁷⁰ Mukerjee 2001: 96

¹⁷¹ Lal 1988: 128

¹⁷² Manucci 1906: 352-353

ensure complete purdah.¹⁷³ Women would move about freely in these pleasure gardens devoid of worries of everyday life. They would spend their time watching artists sing, dance and perform before them. Thus outdoor activities of the harem women were also guarded and all the fun and enjoyment was of more private nature, away from public gaze.

5.9.2 Outdoor Activities

5.9.2.1 Picnics & Excursions

It is true that for most of their lives the harem ladies remained shut in the imperial palace removed from preying eyes but there were occasions like picnics, excursions or short trips, garden parties,¹⁷⁴ pilgrimages to tombs of saints which gave them the chance to come out of the zenana and catch some fresh air. However strict security and Purdah was followed wherever these ladies went. Among Mughal emperors Jahangir was very fond of outdoor activities and loved spending time with his ladies in picnics and boat rides. Garden parties were an occasion of great merriment studded with great food and music. Historical accounts are filled with elaborate description of many such parties and joyous occasions. Mentioning about one such occasion thus writes Jahangir “I held a meeting in one of the houses of the palace of Nurjahan Begum, which was situated in the midst of large tanks, and the Amirs and courtiers to the feast, which had been prepared by Begam. There were all kinds of intoxicating drinks...All sorts of roast meats, and fruits...After three or four *gharis* of night had passed, I dismissed the men and summoned the ladies, and till a watch of night passed the time in this delightful place...This Thursday was the day of my ascension of the throne; secondly it was Shab-i-Barat; thirdly, it was the day of *rakhi*. On account of these three pieces of good fortune I called the day Mubarak-Shamba.”¹⁷⁵

Hunting

Hunting is generally considered to be a male sport but many Mughal women were

¹⁷³ Latif 1892: 141n

¹⁷⁴ Lal 1988: 137-138

¹⁷⁵ Jahangir 1989: 385-86

skilled in the field of shooting. Nurjahan and Aurangzeb's daughter Zeb-un-Nisa's¹⁷⁶ name prominently figure in the list of skilled shots women. Jahangir's women often accompanied him on his hunting parties. Among them Nurjahan proved her skill many times as she was skilled enough to out- rival not just women but even men in this field. She is said to have shot an exotic bird called *Qarisha* during Jahangir's hunting sojourn near Ajmer in 1616.¹⁷⁷ At another place the daunting lady killed four tigers in six shots. For this marvelous performance the loving husband gave her "a pair of diamond bracelets" and "scattered 1,000 aharfis" over her.¹⁷⁸ Mughal chronicler Khafi Khan gives a very interesting account of Nurjahan Begum gaining her shooting skills. It so happened that once Jahangir had gone out shooting with his women, suddenly a lion appeared while Nurjahan got frightened at the sight of the deadly beast, one of her co-wives Rajput princess Jagat Gosain took up her gun and killed the lion. While Jahangir applauded his Rajput wife for her swiftness he called Nurjahan coward. This precipitated her desire to prove her skills as an expert shots woman.

Pigeon flying

Ishq-Bazi or pigeon flying was a popular outdoor activity among the Mughal rulers. Akbar is said to have been very fond of it.¹⁷⁹ The women could only participate as spectators in this activity as this was a male preserve. In any case the women would have thoroughly enjoyed the thrills and fun of this enterprise.¹⁸⁰

5.10 Use of Intoxicants

Drinking and taking drugs was a common practice among the Mughal Royals and both men and women were fond of it. Women learnt drinking from their men folk and gradually it became a fashionable practice despite religious prohibition over it.¹⁸¹ Manucci tells us that the practice of consuming wine and drugs was so popular that

¹⁷⁶ Zeb-un-Nisa 1913: 14

¹⁷⁷ Jahangir 1989: 348

¹⁷⁸ Ibid:375

¹⁷⁹ Fazal 1993: 310

¹⁸⁰ Mukerjee 2001: 100

¹⁸¹ Pelsaert 1925: 65

stringent measures were taken to stop the influx of such things into the harem. The eunuchs would thoroughly search all the visitors to the female apartments to ensure that no unwarranted substance would enter the harem.¹⁸² We already know that Jahangir's first wife Manbai was addicted to *bhang* and its over-consumption led to her death.¹⁸³ Among royal women Shahjahan's daughter Jahanara is said to have been very fond of drinking. Manucci informs us that wine was imported from far off places for her use.¹⁸⁴ Aurangjeb's wife Udaipuri Mahal is also known in history for her fondness for drinking.¹⁸⁵

During the reign of Aurangjeb the problem of drinking had reached mammoth proportions so much so that the Muslim clerics requested Aurangjeb to issue orders prohibiting use of intoxicants among women. The women of the harem were outraged by this order in full knowledge of the fact that the women of *Ulema's* household too drank liberally. Hence in order to expose the Ulema they devised a plan led by Jahanara Begum who invited ladies of prominent Muslim clerics. On being offered wine they heartily drank it and became in high spirits. Jahanara then called Aurangjeb to her apartments and the puritan emperor was left speechless to see the wives of religious leaders in such disheveled state.¹⁸⁶

Though all the Mughal emperors followed a different routine in terms of their stay in the harem, still it formed an important part of their social and private life. Akbar for instance reportedly spent very little time in the harem. As he slept only for three hours.¹⁸⁷ Moreover his eclectic attitude and moral uprightness coupled with religious policy and rigorous lifestyle marked by incessant territorial conquests didn't let him invest much of his time and energy in the seraglio. However he spent his "Fridays in the Harem".¹⁸⁸ Thus we see that harem formed an important part of an idealist like Akbar's life too. While his son and successor Jahangir chose to spend more of his time in the harem. We

¹⁸² manucci 1906: 350-51

¹⁸³ Jahangir 1989: 55-56

¹⁸⁴ Manucci 1906: 211

¹⁸⁵ Ibid:99-100

¹⁸⁶ Manucci :150

¹⁸⁷ Smith 1988: 243

¹⁸⁸ Fazal 1993: 226

can quote K S Lal in this regard.”The king slept in the harem, ate in the harem, and relaxed in the harem. In the harem he was both a master and a guest. The women of course were its permanent twenty-four hour residents.”¹⁸⁹

5.11 Disease, Last days, & death

Harem was basically celebratory in nature-it was meant for celebration of life in every possible form. Disease and illness were not welcome guests here. In fact there was a separate residential facility called *Bimarkhana* inside the seraglio to accommodate the ailing.¹⁹⁰ Stressful and disturbing topics like disease and death were not mentioned in the haremsara for they were against the very concept of it. Manucci for that matter has left behind a very detailed account of health and medical facilities of those times. If we believe him and there is no substantial reason not to do so since most of the information provided by him has come out to be true except the highly controversial charges of incest leveled against Shahjahan his statements have been more or less corroborate by the contemporary writers both foreign and Indian. Another interesting observation of foreign travelers like Bernier and Manucci was that the hot Indian climate helped in quick healing from diseases.¹⁹¹ Though medical facilities were made available to the inmates of Mughal Harem yet quality and effect of medication was seriously affected owing to the practice of Purdah.

Manucci reports that on falling ill the residents of zenana mahal were shifted to the Bimarkhana where they were attended with all care. The important ladies like King’s mother and chief wife received special treatment.

We are told that Nurjahan for that matter was treated by both Hindu and Muslim doctors on falling ill in 1618.¹⁹² If the patient happened to be a favorite of the King she was but once visited by him otherwise only servants and attendants were there to nurse her and in case she did not recover and succumbed to her disease her property was seized by the

¹⁸⁹ Lal 1988: 33

¹⁹⁰ Manucci 1906: 319

¹⁹¹ Bernier 1934: 253-54

¹⁹² Findly 1993: 105

Emperor in favor of the royal treasury.¹⁹³ Since the physicians were not allowed to go inside the harem and personally examine the patient, the quality of diagnosis suffered. Many innovative ways were devised to examine the diseased ladies without their coming out of purdah. For instance a piece of cloth was rubbed all over the body of the patient and then dropped in a jar filled with water. By smelling it the doctor was supposed to diagnose the cause of illness and prescribe medicine. Hakims both Indian and foreigners were appointed in the service of the zenana ladies. Manucci was one such doctor. The Italian traveler was proficient in curing many diseases like paralysis, colic, anemia, fever, stone etc.¹⁹⁴

However Manucci has painted the zenana ladies as sex-hungry perverted souls. Going by his account it seems that the choicest occupation of royal ladies was to look out for men to satisfy their carnal passions. His various stories of visiting the lady patients and their antics point in the same direction. He informs us that few of King's women fake disease to get the opportunity to interact with men like him. He goes on to tell that "The latter (physician) lays his hand inside the curtain; they (women) lay hold of it, kiss it and softly bite it...but I pretend not to notice, in order to conceal what was passing from the patrons and eunuchs then present, and not arouse their suspicion."¹⁹⁵ He mentions the case of Nawal Bae wife of Wazir named Asad Khan who reportedly told him that, "her only thoughts were to imagine something by which she could please her husband and hinder his going near other women."¹⁹⁶

Though this seems more of an exaggeration colored by the ever-working imagination of a foreign traveler but we can't dismiss it altogether either. For the chief role of women was indeed to provide pleasure to the King. However, to regard them as sexual perverts would be erroneous. For we know that purdah was strictly followed by the harem ladies even during old age. In fact there was a procedure that was meant to be followed to get entry into the seraglio. To go inside the female apartments the physician was covered in a cloak up to his waist and went inside (escorted by eunuchs) and he (physician) would

¹⁹³ Manucci 1906: 319

¹⁹⁴ Ibid: 356,404,468

¹⁹⁵ Manucci 1906: 329

¹⁹⁶ Ibid: 329

be brought out in the same manner. Interestingly Manucci has left behind a detailed account of various kind of remedies adopted to cure diseases. He talks about fasting as a general way of curing many ills. Likewise bleeding was another popular remedy with the harem inmates. Sometimes Manucci is said to have bled them and many a times they bled themselves. He generally charged two hundred rupees for the said treatment but one of Aurangzeb's wives who suffered from gout was his regular patient from whom he charged four hundred rupees for every bleeding.¹⁹⁷

Sentiments like pathos, melancholy, sorrow, disease, and death were forbidden words in the harem premises. We can assuage this from the very fact that there was no place for diseased women in zenana and they were instantly shifted to the Bimarkhana, though they were attended well there but could come out of it either dead or alive. In a place where youth and beauty were a woman's chief assets nobody was interested to see dull and diseased faces. Not to mention the ready availability of fresh and youthful faces in the polygamous Mughal household. It is ironical to note that while death of a woman was not a matter of great significance that of the King meant the end of world for his women. Though Islam readily permits remarriage for widows, this practice went more or less into disuse after Akbar's reign. As a matter of fact after his death all the widows of Akbar were sent to live by the side of his tomb at Sikandra.¹⁹⁸

However it would be wrong to assume that the Mughals as a race were devoid of human sentiments of love and affection. They did know how to love and to mourn the loss of that love. It is just that their expression of love and longing was different and so were the times in which they lived. Hence the modern standards of fidelity and devotion in marriage can't be applied upon them. If it was not so Shahjahan would not have lamented over the death of Mumtaz; Jahangir would not have relegated his heart and empire to Nurjahan; Khusrav won't have chosen a life of misery instead of taking a new wife; Jahangir won't have suffered at the death of Manbai and Anarkali the way he did; Azam won't have lost the pleasures of life at the demise of his wife Jahanzeb Banu¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ Ibid: 354-55

¹⁹⁸ Foster 1921: 186

¹⁹⁹ Sarkar 1912: 81

All these instances reflect upon the lesser known side of the Mughals, that of loving and caring husbands and lovers. There was no dearth of filial sentiments either. In fact senior female relations like mother, foster mothers, step-mothers, aunts sisters and daughters were all held in very high esteem. Akbar's deep attachment for his mother Hamida Banu Begum is well known. Likewise the death of Jahangir's foster mother had deeply pained him.²⁰⁰

Hence we see that sentiments and emotions were definitely their, like today- the only difference lays in their proportion or rather disproportion. Given the mammoth size of Mughal harem the given examples seem more like a rarity then a general rule. In the entire history of the Mughals there is only one Nurjahan and only one Mumtaz Mahal. Perhaps this owed to lack of attachment and devotion to a single partner, which was understandably rare in the polygamous household. In medieval world youth and beauty made a woman her master's favorite. Disease and illness distorted this very idea of womanhood and hence it was anathema to the contemporary sensibilities. Death of a woman after all was a trivial event in the life of a medieval man and hence of little interest to those around him.²⁰¹

²⁰⁰ Jahangir 1989: 85

²⁰¹ Lal 1988:152

CHAPTER 6

ROLE OF ROYAL MUGHAL WOMEN IN SOCIAL, POLITICAL & ECONOMIC FIELDS

Role of Mughal Women in Politics: From Babur to Aurangjeb

The Mughal annals are filled with numerous such instances when the ladies of the harem played active political role. Owing to seniority and their influential position the mother, step mothers, foster mothers, aunts, wives, sisters and daughters of the Mughal Emperors often acted as peace makers between the mutually warring factions of the imperial family.¹ Nevertheless, there are few instances when Mughal women wielded more direct political power and control. Like Jahangir's wife Nurjahan² who became the *de facto* ruler during the reign of her husband. Shahjahan's daughters Jahanara and Roshanara got indirectly involved in the war of succession by supporting the cause of their contending brothers.

Nevertheless in the entire history of the Mughals of India we do not have a female sovereign but harem politics was an accepted norm of those times. The women exerted tremendous power from behind the veil. As councilors and advisors they decidedly influenced the decisions of state policy and this continued unabated throughout the period of our present study. From the victory of Babur in the battle of Panipat in 1526 till the death of Aurangjeb in 1707 A.D. The senior Mughal ladies (mothers, sisters and aunts) had the authority to mediate and settle disputes between the members of the *khandan*.³ The king reposed great faith in the wisdom and sagacity of these ladies and would often seek their advice in public (court) and private (family) matters.

We will now try to assess the respective female influence in the lives of six successive Mughal monarchs ranging from Babur to Aurangjeb:

¹ Srivastava 1952: 261

² Ibid: 274

³ Lal 2005:129-130

6.1 Influential Women in Babur's Time

6.1.1 Aisan Daulat Begum

The most important and undiluted influence on the mind of Babur was that of his grandmother Aisan Daulat Begum, mother of his mother Qutlugh Nigar Khanum. Known for her resoluteness and tenacity of purpose this lady had braved many a hardships with her husband and had a hand in cultivating the fearless attitude of Babur. On the death of his father Umar Sheikh Mirza, Babur was yet a young boy of eleven. Surrounded by enemies on all sides his condition was precarious. At this juncture the grandmother of the young Babur came to his aid and helped him understand the nitty-gritty of politics and administration. New and more reliable officers were posted at places of strategic importance at her prodding.⁴ Right from a very young age Aisan Begum influenced her grandson's mind by telling him the stories of warriors like Chinghiz Khan and Timur Lang. These stories became the founding stones for Babur's later heroic enterprises.⁵ About her Babur fondly writes in his memoirs, "Few among women will have been my grandmother's equals for judgment and counsel; she was very wise and farsighted and most affairs of mine were carried through under her advice."⁶

One major political crisis of Babur's life arose in 1494 A.D. when Hasan-i-Yaqub planned to dethrone Babur from Farghana and place his younger brother Jehangir Mirza on the throne. However, fortunately for Babur Aisan Daulat Begum got wind of this plan and took measures to guard her grandson from the conspirators. She not only foiled the conspiracy but arranged for a safe passage for Babur as well but Hasan-i-Yaqub could not be caught and ran away to safety. Later on when she learnt about the designs of Hasan-i-Yaqub to attack Andijan with the help of his ally Sultan Mahmud Mirza, an army was dispatched to deal with the impending threat but incidentally Yaqub was killed by a shot of one of his own men in the dark of night.⁷ Thus for the timely activity of the Mughal matriarch not just the throne but also the life of Babur was saved. Hence we find that Aisan Daulat Begum

⁴ Shyam 1978: 35

⁵ Ibid:52

⁶ Babur 1997: 43

⁷ Babur 1997: 43

had a big hand in the later successes of her grandson Babur. Had she not been there neither Babur could have learnt the intricacies of politics and statecraft nor would he have developed the kind of broader vision, grit, and resolution that helped him become the ruler of Hindustan against all odds. For this service the Mughal dynasty will forever remain indebted to Aisan Daulat Begum.

6.1.2 Qutlugh Nigar Khanum

She was the mother of Babur and was the second most influential woman in his life after Aisan Daulat Begum. When Babur was expelled out of his home country and was struggling to carve a niche in those days of struggle and hardship this lady stood as a firm support by the side of her son. The qualities of patience, fortitude, and steely courage that came to be associated with Babur were instilled in him by his mother.⁸ Ironically Qutlugh Begum who accompanied her son in the most difficult of situations could not live long enough to see him become the Emperor of India. Born to Yunus Khan and Aisan Daulat Begum this lady had inherited the qualities of head and heart from her mother and was the driving force behind the first Mughal Babur's daring approach towards difficulty and challenges. About her writes the devoted son, "She was with me in most of my guerilla expeditions and throne less times."⁹

6.1.3 Khanzada Begum

A curious case is of Babur's sister Khanzada Begum who played a very important role in contemporary politics. As she became instrumental in saving her brother's kingdom from Shaibani Khan's onslaught. Though we have two different versions of this incident the one mentioned by Gulbadan Begum apprises us that Uzbek chief Shaibani Khan had asked for Babur's sister Khanzada Begum's hand as a condition for lasting peace.¹⁰ While Babur writing in

⁸ Mukerjee 2001: 116

⁹ Babur 1997: 21

¹⁰ Begum 1902: fol.3b

his memoirs refers to “Khanzada Begum falling captive to Muhammad Shiybani Khan”¹¹ during the siege of Samarkand. Whichever version of the story we adhere to the fact remains that during the time of Babur a sister could be ‘sacrificed’ for the welfare of the state, a proposition that seems unthinkable in the time of his grandson Akbar. We are informed through the contemporary sources that Khanzada Begum came back to the Mughals ten years later.¹² This return signifies the fact that till this time no stigma was attached to such women who were ‘lost’ and later ‘recovered’. In fact the high status accorded to Khanzada Begum upon her return is exemplary. Her niece Gulbadan calls her “my dearest lady (aka janam)”, we have the instance of Babur’s wife Dildar Begum referring Kamran to Khanzada Begum, once when he sought her advice during his struggle with Humayun for she was considered the most senior and respectable woman in the harem.

Contemporary sources inform us that Babur’s sister Khanzada Begum held a very prominent place in the imperial harem and this continued unabated even during the reign of his son Humayun. We are informed that after the death of Humayun’s mother Maham Begum Khanzada Begum was elevated to the rank of Padshah Begum. Thus we see that while she not only sacrificed her life for the well being of the empire, later before rejoining the Mughal family she acted as a goodwill ambassador between her brother Babur and the Shah of Persia¹³ and much later as a senior lady of the harem helped to settle disputes between Humayun and his warring brothers. Thus her role in politics was both exemplary and commendable.

6.1.4 Bibi Mubarika

Marriage in those times was a means to increase the political power of ruling houses and sovereigns. Babur married Bibi Mubarika, daughter of Shah Mansur Yusufzai,¹⁴ chief of Yusufzais of Afghanistan. The chief reason of this marriage was to improve the relations with

¹¹ Babur 1997:17-18

¹² Mukerjee 2001: 118

¹³ Mukerjee 2001: 118

¹⁴ Begum 1994:266

ever troubling tribe of Yusufzais. This matrimonial alliance won Babur lifelong services and loyalty of the Afghans.¹⁵ Fondly called as Afghani Agacha by Gulbadan Begum this lady remained to be one of the favorite wives of Babur. She outlived him and died during the reign of Akbar.

6.2 Influential Women in Humayun's Time

6.2.1 Hamida Banu Begum

Hamida Banu Begum was married off to Humayun in 1541 A.D.; this marriage won Humayun lifelong support and friendship of his wife's Shia kinsmen. In fact during his exile from India Humayun was given asylum and military help by the Shia ruler of Iran.¹⁶ Though Hamida Banu is not known to have played any direct role in politics but she voluntarily chose to accompany her husband during his hardships and long years of wandering. Perhaps the biggest sacrifice that she made was to leave behind her infant son Akbar to be with her husband. In fact Hamida Begum could barely see her son grow up during the initial years of his life because of her husband Humayun's exile and unsettled life. It was only in 1557 that she was finally reunited with her son and continued to do so till her death in 1604.¹⁷ Her biggest contribution was perhaps giving birth to one of the greatest and mightiest rulers that the world has ever known –Akbar.¹⁸ Hamida Banu later styled *Maryam Makani* remained the one cohesive factor binding the Mughal family together till her death. During Salim's revolt against his father she tried to pacify both his son and grandson to set the matters right. Akbar is known to have relied heavily on his sagacious mother for advice and counsel.

6.2.2 Senior Women as Peace Makers

Just as in the time of Babur senior women of the Mughal harem continued to act as peace makers and kept solving the frequently occurring disputes between Humayun and his brothers. However Humayun was benevolent towards all his brothers right from the

¹⁵ Banerjee 1983: 322

¹⁶ Mukerjee 2001: 120

¹⁷ Beveridge 1994:240-41(notes)

¹⁸ Mukerjee 2001: 120-21

beginning of his reign and as per the Timurid custom parceled the empire bequeathed to him by Babur among himself and his three brothers. He gave Kamran Kabul and Kandahar; Mirza Askari held Sambhal and Mirza Hindal was given Alwar.¹⁹ Still he was disturbed by his ambitious brothers from time to time. We have numerous instances from this time that refer to recurring disputes between the royal brothers and their seeking advice from their elderly female relations during these difficult times. Around 1541 matters took a very ugly turn between the *padshah* and his step-brothers. Hindal procured Kabul from its governor, Qaracheh Khan. Even Kamran was not favorable to him. This rendered Humayun's position precarious. At this crucial juncture Humayun went to his aunt Khanzada Begum and requested her to advise Hindal and Kamran to leave the path of sedition.

Khanzada Begum travelled all the way to Kandahar where Kamran also came to meet her. It was now that he urged the Begum to have the *Khutba (haqiqat-i-khutbeh)* read in his name. To this Khanzada Begum reportedly said, "As the throne of Hindustan was ordained upon Emperor Humayun by his majesty *Firdaus Makani* (Babur), and all of you have read the Khutba in his name till now, it's your duty to remain obedient to him."²⁰ One more incident from the difficult times of Humayun's life could be cited as an example of the immense hold and power that the senior women held in the Mughal domestic domain. Soon before the catastrophe of Chausa, Mirza Hindal rebelled against Humayun and had the Khutba read in his name. At this time Humayun was at Gaur, he immediately left for Agra. It was on his way back that the battle of Chausa took place. The battle saw complete rout of the Mughal army at the hands of Sher Shah's men. Humayun lost the battle and the prestige of the imperial forces was put at stake but above all it was a personal loss to Humayun. Four thousand women of Humayun's harem fell to the Afghans including his young daughter Aqiqa, who was lost forever.

After the battle Humayun went to see Hindal's mother and his step-mother Dildar Begum.²¹

where he reportedly told her that he had no ill will against Hindal and the two should reconcile

¹⁹ Fazal 1993: 462,467-68

²⁰ Ibid: 463-70

²¹ Begum 1994:139

for the betterment of the empire. He asked Gulbadan Begum to go and fetch him. To this Dildar Begum suggested that instead of her daughter it would be better suited for her to go and bring Hindal to His Majesties presence. Accordingly the Mughal matriarch went to Alwar and brought her son from there and presented him before Humayun. Abul Fazal's Akbarnama gives a detailed narrative of the incident of Mirza Hindal visiting his mother after getting the Khutba read in his name. On this occasion he found Dildar Begum, referred as "*cupola of chastity*" wearing a blue cloth over her breast. Seeing this Hindal said, "What kind of dress is this that you have donned at such a time of rejoicing?" To this the lady replied, "Why do you regard me?" I am wearing mourning; you are young (nineteen) and have, from the instigation of unreflecting sedition- mongers, lost the true way; you have girded your lions for your own destruction."²² Thus it becomes amply clear that though the love of a mother for her son was natural, importance of proper conduct and obedience to the crown were paramount. Hence we see Dildar Begum trying to correct her son by symbolically wearing *Kabud* (sign of mourning) instead of taking his side or instigating him.

6.3 Influential Women in Akbar's Time

6.3.1 Hamida Banu Begum

Akbar's closeness to his mother Hamida Banu is well known.²³ Widowed at a young age this lady remained a strong pillar of support to her son throughout the ups and downs of life. Due to Humayun's exile from India the lady remained away from her son during his young age. However the year 1557 saw the mother and son duo reunite and continued to do so till her death in 1604. Akbar always relied upon his mother for advice and guidance. In fact her biggest contribution lay in bringing truce between Akbar and his rebel son prince Salim. Thus we see that instead of playing any direct political role Maryam Makani owing to her influence as the

²² Fazal 1993: 339

²³ Mukerjee 2001: 120-21

Queen mother and family matriarch exerted positive influence upon the members of the Mughal family.²⁴

6.3.2 Maham Anaga

At the time of his accession to the throne of Hindustan Akbar was a boy of fourteen years. The infant Mughal state in India was in a precarious condition and there were enemies on all sides among such conditions the young Emperor was ably guided by Bairam Khan who faithfully served him as the *vakil* (regent) and paved the way for strengthening of the nascent Mughal empire in India.²⁵ Akbar always trusted his *ataliq* (guardian) and respected his advice and decisions but gradually *Khan Baba* became somewhat dictatorial and high-handed in his ways and Akbar started feeling over-shadowed by him. At the same time there was another set of people close to Akbar who were jealous of Bairam Khan's growing influence and power over him. This faction was led by one of his nurses named Maham Anagah. Though fiercely loyal to Akbar and the Mughal family this woman had her own ambitions. Married to Nadim Khan Kuka she had two sons named Baqi Kuka and the ill-famous Adham Khan.²⁶

Due to her close proximity with the Emperor Maham Anaga got the chance to poison his ears against Bairam Khan whose high-handedness made it easy for her to further her designs. This all happened when Akbar went to Delhi from Sikandarabad to see the ailing mother of Delhi Governor Shihabuddin at Maham's insistence who was also a relative of hers. Both Maham and Shihabuddin convinced young Akbar against Bairam Khan's evil intentions. Akbar issued orders for the Khan-i-Khana going on a pilgrimage to Mecca and himself assuming all the powers of state.²⁷ In the meantime Maham Anaga foiled all the attempts of Bairam Khan to reach out to Akbar. The dejected Khan decided to comply with the orders and proceeded to Gujarat but was instigated by evil advisors to revolt against the injustice done to him. Young Akbar badly

²⁴ Ibid: 121

²⁵ Fazal 1993: 330; Mukerjee 2001: 122

²⁶ Begum 1994: 255(notes)

²⁷ Fazal 1993: 352

defeated Bairam's revolt but pardoned him for his services to the empire. Bairam left for Mecca but couldn't reach there as he was killed in 1561 by an Afghan assassin.²⁸

After the fall of Bairam Khan it became very easy for Maham Anagah to control the reigns of Mughal Empire as Akbar blindly trusted her. She wanted her son Adham Khan to be made the new Vakil but the post was given to Munim Khan. The new prime minister tried to warn Akbar about Maham's growing influence but he paid no heed to his advice. After sometime Akbar planned to attack Malwa which was ruled by a pleasure loving king named Baz Bahadur. Adham Khan was sent at the head of the Mughal contingent to Malwa where he defeated the Malwa ruler who fled out of Sarangpur. At this stage Adham Khan seized all valuable possessions of Baz Bahadur including the women of his harem.²⁹ Among these women was also the legendary beauty of Malwa named Rupmati. All the prevailing rules of decency and court decorum were flouted by Adham Khan who indulged in all kinds of frivolities while his men tortured the women of Baz Bahadur's harem. Adham Khan even kept much of the war booty to himself instead of sending it to the imperial court as per the prevalent custom.³⁰

Alarmed by the proceedings at Malwa Akbar left for Sarangpur besides warning Maham about her son's unacceptable behavior. The lady asked her son to surrender the war booty to the Emperor. While Akbar went back to Agra after subsiding the issues at Sarangpur the wicked Adham Khan resumed his bad ways and took hold of Rupmati and other women. When Akbar came to know about this he asked him to return the ladies to the imperial camp. At this time Maham Anagah had Rupmati and other women of Baz Bahadur's harem murdered so that they might not tell the Emperor about her son's evil doings.³¹ Akbar was outraged by these incidents but he decided to act swiftly and reshuffled the administrative machinery of the state. Pir Muhammad was made the new governor of Malwa and Munim Khan was replaced with Shamsuddin Atgha Khan as the new Vakil of the Empire. He was the husband of another nurse of Akbar named Jiji Anaga. However the new Prime Minister was killed by jealous Adham Khan in May 1562.

²⁸ Mukerjee 2001: 124

²⁹ Fazal 1993: 214

³⁰ Ibid:214

³¹ Mukerjee 2001: 125

Abul Fazal tells us in Akbarnama that after committing this horrible crime the “black fated one” (Adham Khan) went towards the imperial harem where Akbar was present at that time with evil intentions. (Fazal 1993: 270) When Akbar was apprised about the unfortunate proceedings he came out of the harem with a sword in his hands. Akbar reportedly struck Adham Khan such a hard blow that he immediately fell to the ground. Then he asked his officers to throw him down from the terrace. Thus came the end of Adham Khan. Akbar is said to have informed Maham Anagha about her loss personally. It is said that the grieving mother died within forty days of this catastrophe and Akbar ordered the dead body to be sent to Delhi where a tomb was raised over it. Akbar was naturally saddened at the demise of his foster mother and gave this “cupola of chastity” the high honor of escorting her bier. Thus came to an end the inglorious petticoat regime of Maham Anagah and an eventful chapter in the Mughal history drew to a close.

6.3.3 Bakhtunnisa

Bakhtunnisa Begum was born to Humayun and Mahchuchak Begum in 1550.³² She played an important part in contemporary politics. In fact she happens to be the only Mughal lady to have become the Governor of a state under the Mughal regime. It so happened that Muhammad Hakim who was Bakhtunnisa Begum’s real brother was the governor of Kabul. In 1581 he rebelled against Akbar and invaded Punjab. Akbar marched with his army to Kabul in order to crush his step-brother’s rebellion. However no war took place as the Kabul Governor ran away. Later when Muhammad Hakim asked for forgiveness Akbar pardoned him but he was removed from governorship and his sister Bakhtunnisa was appointed as the governor of that province in his place.³³ Though Mirza after sometime occupied his former position all the Royal orders continued to be issued in the name of his sister.³⁴ Hence although lesser known in history for her contribution Bakhtunnisa Begum was instrumental in proving that apart from acting as councilors and peace makers Mughal women could well become administrators also.

³² Begum 1994: 214 notes).

³³ Monserrate 1922: 153

³⁴ Smith 1988: 143

6.3.4 Akbar's other wives

Akbar had many wives and few of them like Ruqaiyya Begum and Salima Sultan Begum went on to acquire a very important place in the Emperor's life and the Mughal household. However, primarily their role remained limited to that of peace-makers and councilors resolving family feuds. During the revolt of prince Salim against his father the senior wives of Akbar intervened many a times to pacify the situation and the final reunion between the estranged father and son is largely credited to the efforts of senior harem ladies. Besides Akbar's mother Hamida Banu Begum, his aunt Gulbadan Begum³⁵ and sister Bakhtunnisa, many of his wives also tried to bring on a reconciliation between the aging Mughal Monarch and his rebellious young son. Salima Sultan Begum, Ruqaiyya Begum and Akbar's Rajput wife and mother of Salim, Mariyam-uz- Zamani were instrumental in bringing on truce between the hostile father and son.

Towards the close of the 16th century the stories of escalating tension between Emperor Akbar and likely heir to the throne *Shahzada* Salim had started circulating in the Mughal court as well as harem circles.³⁶ The relations had deteriorated to the extent that Badauni even makes mention of Salim poisoning his father with the aid of Royal physician Hakim Hummam.³⁷ It was suspected that the young prince was getting restless to ascend to the throne and Akbar was in strong state of health showing no signs of immediate decline. Jahangir's habit of excessive drinking coupled with declining health of his other two brothers Murad and Daniyal was reason enough for worry to ageing Akbar about the security and continuity of the Mughal empire. However the senior ladies of the harem convinced the third Mughal to forgive Jahangir for his excesses and misconduct and Akbar agreed to meet his son before leaving for the Deccan in 1599.

But soon prodded by sycophants and evil advisors Jahangir raised the standard of revolt against his father taking advantage of his absence in the far off Deccan and went to the extent of establishing his own court at Allahabad.³⁸ and parts of Bihar appointing his foster

³⁵ Fazal 1993: 1140-1230

³⁶ Mukerjee 2001: 130

³⁷ Badauni 1986: 390

³⁸ Prasad 1922: 45

brother Qutubuddin Khan Koka as the governor of Bihar. Enraged at this behavior of his son the Mughal Monarch decided to deal with the rebellious prince with a heavy hand. The killing of Akbar's most trusted aid and councilor Abul Fazal by Bir Singh Bundela at Jahangir's orders made the matters worse.³⁹ But circumstances had rendered Jahangir in a privileged position. His brother Murad was already dead while Daniyal was moving fast towards grave. There was no one else to succeed Akbar to the throne of Hindustan. At this crucial juncture the senior women of Akbar's harem intervened and tried to bring forth reconciliation between the mutually hostile father and son. Salima Sultan, widow of Bairam Khan and now Akbar's wife tried to pacify the Emperor by recalling that how he had desperately prayed for Salim's birth. Relenting to her advice the Mughal asked Salima Begum to go to Allahabad and ask Salim to give up his rebellious ways and return to the court at Agra asking for forgiveness.⁴⁰ Within a few months of Abul Fazal's murder Salima Begum successfully brought back her stepson to Agra.

As per history records the meeting between estranged father and son took place in the apartments of Hamida Begum where both she and Salima Sultan Begum threw Jahangir at Akbar's feet thus a happy reunion took place with Akbar embracing his son and placing his turban over his head signaling truce and proclaimed him to be the heir-apparent⁴¹ Jahangir in turn gave 354 elephants and 1000 muhars to Akbar. Nevertheless, the truce was temporary as soon Jahangir was back to his confrontational attitude. He refused to obey Akbar's orders to proceed to subdue Mewar on one pretext or the other and went back to establish his independent court at Allahabad. Amidst all this Akbar's health was declining fast and he felt lonely and helpless at the ungrateful attitude of the son he had always doted upon. About the same time attempts were made to substitute Salim with his seventeen year old son Khusrau. Supported by his uncle Man Singh and father-in-law Mirza Aziz Koka, Khusrau came in open confrontation with his father.

This caused such uneasiness to his mother Manbai that she committed suicide by taking a large dose of opium. Salim was shattered by this loss of personal life so much so that Akbar

³⁹ Ibid:54-55

⁴⁰ Fazal 1993:1223

⁴¹ Prasad 1922: 56

wrote an affectionate letter of condolence to him.⁴² Death of his dear wife and companion of early youth rendered the already impulsive and fickle Jahangir all the more ferocious and callous. In fact during this period he displayed the cruelest side of his personality. Once he ordered a man guilty of conspiring against him to be flayed in his presence. This was in 1604, the same year Jahangir's step brother Daniyal died of consumption. Thus clearing the way for his undisputed accession to the Mughal throne but he kept insisting upon his treacherous ways. Appalled by his behavior Akbar finally decided to teach him a lesson this time and ignoring the sentiments of his mother, wives, and other female relatives decided to tame him by use of force. Therefore, he marched ahead of a strong army towards Allahabad but on his way was given the news of his mother Mariyam Makani's deteriorating condition. Akbar rushed back towards Agra to find his mother rapidly sinking and lost her within few hours. Ironically the unfortunate incident of the death of dowager queen paved the way for a final conciliation between the estranged father and son.⁴³

Jahangir decided to publicly mourn the death of his grandmother at Agra along with his father fully recognizing that in her death he had lost his biggest benefactor. Akbar welcomed his son warmly in an open court. However, it is reported that in private he strictly admonished him for his past behavior. For full ten days he was kept under house arrest devoid of wine and opium under the guard of physicians and trusted men. At this decisive moment in Mughal and Indian history the female relations of the captive prince came to his rescue and requested Akbar to release and forgive Salim for his past misgivings. Later on his death bed Akbar acknowledged Salim as the next emperor of Hindustan by ordaining upon him his dagger and robe of honor⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the contribution of Royal Mughal ladies can't be overlooked in this regard. It is to them that the credit of Jahangir's release goes who in spite of his repeated mistakes was pardoned by Akbar again and again. We can't ignore the political limitations, which compelled Akbar to overlook the erring prince in spite of his gross inequities and ingratitude and had he been provided with a more viable option Jahangir

⁴² Ibid: 64

⁴³ Prasad 1922: 68

⁴⁴ Prasad 1922: 72

might not have been his choice to the throne of Hindustan but it was not meant to be. Anyways the role of Harem ladies in bringing forth unison between the estranged father and son cannot be denied.⁴⁵

6.3.5 Rajput Wives of Akbar

Akbar ascended to the imperial throne at the tender age of fourteen. During the initial years of his reign he remained highly influenced by his regent Bairam Khan and for sometime under the influence of his nurse Maham Anaga. However, eventually he came out of their influence and exerted his sovereignty. At this time the biggest challenge before him was to gain support of his majority population who were Hindus. Primarily to this end he entered into matrimonial alliances with Rajputs.⁴⁶ These marriages gained him lifelong loyalty of brave Rajput¹ besides firmly establishing his image as the true leader of all his subjects. Whatever be his reasons but we can't ignore the fact that Akbar never forced his wives to accept Islam. In fact they were given complete religious freedom within the harem precincts. The relatives of these ladies were given high posts in the empire. Hence it was a gainful preposition for both the sides, which paved the way for the unique *Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb* of Hindustan.

Though not much is known about the political role of either of Akbar's Rajput wives but owing to the close proximity of the fathers, brothers and nephews of these ladies with the Mughal throne and the part these Rajput men played in the strengthening of the empire they surely held high position in the harem. Becoming mother to a son and more so to the heir gave women great power. Fortunately two Rajput ladies had the privilege of becoming mothers to two successive Mughal monarchs. Akbar's Kachwaha wife Harkha Bai held a very important place in the zenana.⁴⁷ She had the good fortune of giving birth to Salim (later Jahangir). Both her father Raja Bihari Mal and brother Bhagwan Das were given high mansabs in the empire. Her nephew Man Singh rose to become a very high ranked official in the Mughal service while her niece Manbai was chosen to be the first bride of prince Salim by Akbar. Maryam-uz-zamani was also the first Mughal lady to have ventured into

⁴⁵ Mukerjee 2001:130-31

⁴⁶ Nath 1994: 40-41

⁴⁷ Mukerjee 2001: 128

trading activity.⁴⁸

6.4 Influential Women in Jahangir's Time

6.4.1 Nurjahan

Jahangir's marriage with Nurjahan was solemnized in May 1611, which not only proved to be his last but also turned a new leaf in the Mughal history. All contemporary sources testify to Nurjahan gaining unprecedented precedence over her second husband.

At the time of this marriage Jahangir stood fairly old at 42 by the contemporary standards. His regular use of alcohol and opium had badly affected his constitution.⁴⁹ It is quite intriguing to note that Jahangir let Nurjahan become the *de facto* ruler with himself taking a backseat in the affairs of state. However it would be wrong to think that Nurjahan's dominance proved only harmful to the empire. It had its own pros and cons. On the whole it served the cause of the empire well especially in the fields of art and culture. A careful perusal of contemporary facts tell us that Nurjahan did not become a ruler of her *weak* husband rather her husband delegated powers to her in full view of her capability and loyalty towards him. Dow can be quoted in this regard:

“Her abilities were uncommon; for she rendered herself absolute, in a government in which women are thought incapable of bearing any part. Their power, it is true, is sometimes exerted in the harem; but, like the virtues of the magnet, it is silent and unperceived. Noor-jehan stood forth in public; she broke through all restraint and custom, and acquired power by her own address, more than by the weakness of Jahangir.”⁵⁰

Gradually her power reached such a pass that coins were struck in her name.⁵¹ She would sit in the jharokha and receive petitions from nobility, she ventured into trade and her ships travelled far and wide, people were promoted and demoted at her bidding, she engaged in construction activity of the highest order, did works of unbounded charity and got many orphan girls married proportioning them with rich dowry.⁵² A careful study of

⁴⁸ Mukerjee 2001: 238

⁴⁹ Jahangir 1989: 1.308

⁵⁰ Dow 1973:3.184

⁵¹ Pelsaert 1925: 29

⁵² Khan 1865: 405

contemporary sources both Indian and Foreign make us believe that the period of Nurjahan's ascent can be divided into two periods- from 1611 to 1622 and 1622-1627.⁵³ While from 1611-1622 A.D. Nurjahan found herself at the helm of affairs with all the political power concentrated in the hands of her famous *junta*. The period from 1622-1627 i.e. during the last five years of Jahangir's reign marked the break-up of the junta and great political uncertainty owing to Nurjahan's soured relations with Khurram.

It needs to be noted that Nurjahan had gained perfect political control within one year of her marriage with Jahangir. She formed the famous Nurjahan Junta comprising of herself and three more members of her family. These included her father Itimad-ud-Daulah, her brother Asaf Khan and stepson Khurram who also happened to be the husband of her niece Arjumand Banu Begum. The ten year long period (1611-1622) which is often ascribed as the period of Nurjahan's ascendancy was in fact the period of her Junta's sway.⁵⁴ These four masterful spirits practically ruled the Mughal empire till 1622. On the whole the dominance of Nurjahan and her clique proved to be beneficial to the empire but it had some ill effects also which we will take up a little later.

We need to understand that Nurjahan's ascendancy does not signal that Jahangir had been rendered powerless. In fact it was a case of willing delegation of power rather than usurpation of the same by a cunning spouse. Nurjahan was indeed a spirited and ambitious lady who possessed tact as well as talent to rule the empire but during medieval age women had no role in power sharing. Except Razia Sultan no woman has ever occupied the throne in medieval Hindustan. Jahangir might have taken a backseat in the state affairs owing to his growing age and deteriorating health but he still was the final authority in all the matters of state policy. Even the all-powerful clique knew this too well and they took decisions keeping Jahangir's opinion in mind. For example we have the famous incident of Jahangir publicly grilling Khurram in Diwan- i-Am for his high handedness with Englishmen at the Western Coast.⁵⁵

Jahangir's famous statement of delegating power to Nurjahan and himself wanting only

⁵³ Prasad 1922: 194

⁵⁴ Prasad 1922: 191

⁵⁵ Ibid: 193

some wine and meat for sustenance has often been cited as a proof of the Mughal Emperor's subservience to his last wife. However our knowledge of Jahangir's personality and character forbids us from believing that he would have passed on the reins of power to his wife and relatives so meekly. There is hardly any reason to doubt that Jahangir loved and trusted Nurjahan dearly and Itimad-ud-Daulah's family stood next only in strength and influence to the imperial family but were these reasons strong enough to make the emperor a puppet in the hands of his manipulating wife. Perhaps 'Not' for all the contemporary sources unanimously inform us that Nurjahan remained devoted to her second husband all through his life and even after death.⁵⁶ As far as the charge of promoting her family in the imperial service is concerned there was nothing new about it as "the very nature of the regime in medieval India was familial. The government of both the Turkish Sultans and the Mughal Emperors was a family affair."⁵⁷ Hence there was nothing new about Nurjahan's near relations being promoted to positions of honor and status. Her brother Asaf Khan and father Ghiyas Beg were men of exceptional talent and merit. They were in the Mughal service even before Nurjahan's marriage to Jahangir. However Nurjahan's marriage to the Mughal Emperor gave further impetus to their already glorious careers.

One thing is clear that had Nurjahan restricted herself to being a loving and devoted wife, inventress of new ways of fashion and food, constructing lofty buildings and doing charity she would not have been the kind of polarizing figure she went on to become in history. Nevertheless, her political sagacity fuelled with enterprising and dominating spirit has won her more foes than friends. In any case Nurjahan has booked herself a permanent place in the Indian annals courtesy the difference she brought to the way we perceive Mughal women before and after her advent.⁵⁸ Coming back to the Junta, this all powerful clique of four masterful personalities worked in complete unison towards fulfilling their vested interests while sparing the King from the responsibility of carrying out day-to-day business of the empire. To this effect a statement of Pelsaert can be quoted here:

"If anyone with a request to make at court obtains an audience or is allowed to speak, the

⁵⁶ Tripathi 1960: *op.cit.*422

⁵⁷ Lal 1988: 80

⁵⁸ Findly 1993:3

king hears him indeed, but will give no definite answer of Yes or No, referring him promptly to Asaf Khan, who in the same way will dispose of no important matter without communicating with his sister, the Queen, and who regulates his attitude in such a way that the authority of neither of them may be diminished. Anyone then who obtains a favour must thank them for it, and not the King.”⁵⁹

Another interesting feature of the junta was the inclusion of Prince Khurram in this clique as he was the only member of the clique who was not related to others through blood. Perhaps because he was the supposed heir apparent and his inclusion gave credence to this quartet. As because of his inclusion in it both the nobility and the general public would readily submit to junta's decrees. The working dynamics of the junta was to provide efficient and loyal service to the Emperor freeing him from relatively stressful job of governance. However any power no matter how strong is bound to come to an end one day or the other and so happened in the case of Nurjahan and her junta. Early signs of strife had appeared as soon as 1617 between Nurjahan and Shahjahan over the question of patronage to the English.⁶⁰ There were three main causes for the collapse of Junta: 1) Marriage of Nurjahan's daughter Ladli Begum with Shahryar which brought the Shahjahan /Asaf Khan camp against Nurjahan; 2) Death of Nurjahan's parents in quick succession in 1621-22 which widened the gulf in the Itimad-ud-Daulah family; 3) Deccan affairs and subsequent death of Khusrau.

A subtle hint towards the troubled relations within the clique came soon after the death of Nurjahan's father Itimad-ud-Daulah. As per the general custom after Itimad-ud-Daulah's death Jahangir was to transfer his former minister's properties to suitable heirs. Interestingly Jahangir gave all the estates of the former minister to his daughter Nurjahan, thus by passing the claims of former's son Asaf Khan. This clearly signaled the rift within the junta. Amidst all this it becomes imperative to discuss the issue of marriage of Nurjahan's daughter from her first husband named Ladli Begum. It is reported that after Khurram's refusal to marry her stepsister, Nurjahan shifted her attention towards Jahangir's eldest son-the ill-fated Khusrau. However, his second choice Khusrau too

⁵⁹ Pelsaert 1925: 50-51

⁶⁰ Findly 1993:161

refused to marry Ladli Begum⁶¹ Nurjahan is said to have harnessed ill-will towards the eldest son of Jahangir since then and had even unsuccessfully attempted to end his life with the aid of her junta in 1616⁶² For years at length Nurjahan had tried to marry her daughter to one of her second husband's sons for the perpetuation of her line by becoming one with the imperial lineage as also for continuing her prominence in the empire.

However her search for a prospective groom for her daughter ended on Jahangir's youngest son Shahryar nicknamed *Nashudani* (Good-for-nothing). He was a young man who could be easily manipulated by his more powerful mother-in-law in case of Jahangir's death, which seemed anything but a matter of time owing to his fast deteriorating health. This marriage solemnized in April, 1621 completely changed the power equations at the court.⁶³ As Nurjahan came in open conflict with Shahjahan and Asaf Khan. Amidst all this in 1620 the condition in the Deccan worsened and needed immediate attention. The Mughal commander in Deccan was Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khana who was asking for imperial reinforcements. Among all Princes Shahjahan was the natural choice for the Deccan campaign owing to his strong military credentials.⁶⁴ However for the shrewd politician that Shahjahan was he agreed to leave on one condition-taking along his elder brother Khusrau citing his affection for him as the reason for this demand.

However it was an open secret that Shahjahan was scared that during his absence in the South Khusrau could pose a threat to his candidacy to the throne, in case Jahangir died. Initially reluctant Emperor finally relented to Shahjahan's wish and bade him farewell in December of 1620. In the Deccan it took Shahjahan only six months to restore Mughal power. Jahangir's response to his son's victories was of cautious praise. Soon after came the news of Khusrau dying of colic at Burhanpur where Shahjahan was then stationed.⁶⁵ Although Jahangir initially believed this theory but soon he came to suspect of Shahjahan's hand in the murder of his eldest son. Hence on Jahangir's orders Khusrau's body which had been hastily buried at Burhanpur was brought to Agra for examination

⁶¹ Valle 1892:1.56-57

⁶² Roe 1873:2.281-83

⁶³ Findly 1993: 163

⁶⁴ Ibid: 168

⁶⁵ Jahangir 1989:228

from where it was dispatched to its final resting place at Allahabad.⁶⁶ Almost all the contemporary authorities hold Shahjahan responsible for the murder of Khusrau. The reason cited is the news of Jahangir's illness that he got in August, 1621 which prompted him to clear his way to the throne in the face of Jahangir's death.

Thus came to an end the life of one of the most tragic figures of Mughal history, the blot of this crime remained with Shahjahan all his life. By this time animosity between Nurjahan and her stepson had reached its climax. Shahjahan's success in the Deccan was against Nurjahan's ambitions of raising her son-in-law Shahryar to the throne. She was desperately seeking for an opportunity to ruin Shahjahan's reputation and fame. The opportunity came her way soon with the Persian occupation of Qandahar.⁶⁷ Nurjahan's plan was to convince Jahangir to send his third son to Qandahar expedition. If Shahjahan would agree to do so it would mean certain defeat and subsequent loss of reputation and in case he refused it would be seen as disobedience and might even lead him into rebellion. Shahjahan did what Nurjahan wanted him to do- refuse the imperial orders. It is not difficult to fathom the possible reasons of his refusal. Going on the perilous Qandahar expedition would mean his distancing himself from the center of power and with Jahangir's rapidly failing health there was every chance of Nurjahan promoting the candidature of her son-in-law to fill the vacant throne.

However Shahjahan did not plainly refuse his father's command, he offered certain conditions to be fulfilled for his going to Qandahar. Jahangir was left infuriated at this behavior of his son. In the coming months the relations between Jahangir and Khurram deteriorated further with the heir apparent's jagir of Hisar Firuza which till now belonged to Shahjahan being given over to Shahryar. The series of incidents ultimately led Shahjahan to revolt against his father. At the head of a strong army he marched towards Agra from Mandu.⁶⁸ Amidst all this Nurjahan brought back Mahabat Khan, an old and trusted Mughal commander from political oblivion to deal with Shahjahan issue. Interestingly enough the same Mahabat Khan had been a staunch enemy of Nurjahan and her junta in the past.

⁶⁶ Prasad 1922:334-35

⁶⁷ Prasad 1922: 337

⁶⁸ Findly 1993: 174

Anyhow a pitched battle was fought between Shahjahan led forces and Imperial armies on March 29, 1623 at Billochpur. The rebels were routed by the Royal forces with Shahjahan's chief aid Raja Bikramjit (Sundar) being beheaded. Jahangir proclaimed "In consequence of his (Sundar) destruction, *bi-daulat* (Shahjahan) did not grid his loin."⁶⁹

From now on Shahjahan remained a fugitive and kept wandering from place to place. In the meantime Mahabat Khan had grown close with Jahangir's son Parvej and had become very powerful. So much so that his growing power had turned Nurjahan apprehensive. However towards 1625 Shahjahan fell ill and this added to his woes. He understood the futility of his cause and decided to ask for his father's forgiveness. It is said that Nurjahan was behind Jahangir's pardoning of his rebellious son. On the fulfillment of some comparatively easy conditions like the surrendering of forts of Rohtas and Asirgarh besides sending two of his sons Dara Shukoh and Aurangzeb to court. Shahjahan complied with the demands and with this his over three year long rebellion of Khurram drew to a close. This rebellion had very bad repercussions for the Mughal Empire as the imperialists suffered huge losses both in terms of men and money.

Nurjahan's hand in the revolt of Shahjahan is beyond doubt as first she created situations for his exit to Deccan and then during the Qandahar crisis she put Shahjahan in such a dilemma that it led to his ultimate rebellion.⁷⁰ Last but not the least her steps at ending Mahabat Khan's political exile and appointing Parvez at the head of party pursuing Shahjahan post Billochpur battle were all attempts at widening the gulf between Shahjahan and other members and confidants of the imperial family. However Shahjahan's revolt was not to be the last during the final years of Jahangir's rule as an old and trusted confidant too on his part raised the standard of revolt against the imperial authority. This person was Jahangir's general Mahabat Khan and like in Shahjahan's revolt the principal character here too was Nurjahan but unlike earlier this time she played a more active and open part. Though the revolt lasted only for 100 days⁷¹ it lay bare the infighting and weaknesses within the imperial family.

⁶⁹ Jahangir 1989: 2.256

⁷⁰ Dow 1973: 3.66-67

⁷¹ Prasad 1922: 385

Zamana Beg was the real name of Mahabat Khan who originally hailed from Kabul and had been in Salim's service since a very young age. At the time of his accession Jahangir rewarded him for his services by making him the *Bakshi* and giving the title of Mahabat Khan. In his illustrious career he had been a loyal, honest, and brave companion of the Emperor and even called a *praiseworthy man*⁷². Jahangir reportedly sent him to do all kinds of nasty things. The most ghastly being the blinding of prince Khusrau. During the revolt of Shahjahan it was the might of Mahabat that eventually saved the day for the imperialists. Jahangir rightly called him "the pillar of the state"⁷³. However the growing influence of Mahabat Khan during the revolt of Jahangir's third son won him many enemies at the court who were jealous of his growing power. Most notable among them was Nurjahan who became extremely suspicious of the general.⁷⁴ There was another aspect to this issue and that was the alliance between Mahabat and Jahangir's son Parvej that rendered Nurjahan apprehensive of the general's motives. As in wake of his recent successes against Shahjahan his brother and Mahabat Khan's protégé Parvej had arisen as a powerful contender to the throne.

As far as Mahabat's attitude towards Nurjahan is concerned he had never been at ease with the unbridled power of the empress and her brother Asaf Khan. Intikhab-i-Jahangir-Shahi even mentions that how Mahabat would often warn Jahangir against the growing influence of Nurjahan. He once reportedly said, "Never has there been a king so subject to the will of his wife. The whole world is surprised that such a wise and sensible Emperor as Jahangir should permit a woman to have great an influence over him."⁷⁵. Hence it is clear that there was no love lost on both sides and it was immediate gain that had forced Nurjahan in bringing Mahabat into the limelight during Shahjahan's revolt. Asaf Khan on his part was naturally hostile to the general owing to his recent military success against his son-in-law. Conspiracies were a regular part of medieval monarchies and Mughals were prone to it. Nurjahan and her brother Asaf Khan started poisoning Jahangir's ears against the growing influence and evil designs of the Royal servant. The Emperor grew uneasy at these stories

⁷² Broecke 1957: 96

⁷³ Jahangir 1989:2.231

⁷⁴ Broecke 1957: 96

⁷⁵ E&D 1873: 6.451-52

and started smelling something foul in Mahabat's motives.

At this time Nurjahan and her brother played a political masterstroke by replacing Mahabat with Khan Jahan Lodi as the wakil of prince Parvez thus naturally weakening the chances of his candidacy to the throne on one hand and send Mahabat away from the center of power to Bengal (as governor) on the other. With some hesitation Parvez yielded to the royal command.⁷⁶ while Mahabat decided to meet the Emperor and clear the charges of embezzlement made against him at the instigation of Nurjahan and Asaf Khan. He marched ahead with his contingent of four to five thousand Rajputs towards the Mughal court at Lahore.⁷⁷ At that time Jahangir had left Lahore and was on his way to Kabul. When the news of Mahabat Khan's arrival came Asaf Khan urged Jahangir to order him to send only his elephants and few attendants ahead of his own arrival. Complying to the imperial command the general sent his son-in-law with the elephants along with an emotional letter to Jahangir. At this stage things took a sharp turn, as the said son-in-law of Mahabat was Barkhurdar, son of Khwaja Umar Naqshabandi who had been married to Mahabat's daughter without obtaining the customary royal assent. Jahangir was naturally enraged at this and on the arrival of the young man to court had him arrested and seized the dowry given to him by his father-in-law.⁷⁸

This incident eventually forced Mahabat Khan to act in earnest and present his case before the Emperor himself. At this time Jahangir had camped on the banks of river Jhelum with Queen Nurjahan and a handful of attendants. Mahabat crossed the bridge and forced himself into Jahangir's presence and thus presented his case:

"I have assured myself that escape from the malice and implacable hatred of Asaf Khan is impossible...I have therefore boldly thrown myself upon your Majesty's protection. If I deserve death or punishment, give the order that I may suffer in your presence."⁷⁹

In the meantime the royal apartments were captured by Mahabat's Rajputs. Jahangir was seated upon an elephant and guarded by Rajputs went to Mahabat's camp. However in this

⁷⁶ Prasad 1922: 367

⁷⁷ Khan 1865: 6.420

⁷⁸ Ibid:6.420

⁷⁹ Khan 1865: 6.422

chaos a big blunder that Mahabat committed was of not securing the custody of Nurjahan, a mistake he was to regret later. Nurjahan on her part somehow reached her brother's abode and convened a meeting of all the nobles and condemned them for the debacle and reportedly said:

“What never entered into the imagination of anyone has come to pass, and now you stand stricken with shame for your conduct before God and man. You must do your best to repair this evil, and advice what course to pursue.”⁸⁰

Propelled by these words the nobles decided to give the dissenters ready fight. Nurjahan on her part readily participated in the battle mounted atop an elephant with her granddaughter by her side.⁸¹ However Mahabat emerged eventually victorious. Interestingly Asaf Khan showed great timidity during the war as seeing the chances of imperial forces' victory grim he fled to the fort of Attock.⁸² Consequently Nurjahan surrendered before Mahabat and was allowed to join the Emperor in captivity. With Nurjahan under his charge Mahabat became the *de facto* ruler of the Mughal Empire. Soon men were dispatched to capture Asaf Khan at Attock. Mahabat made him to swear to God to remain honest and faithful to him for the rest of his life and his life was spared.⁸³ After strengthening his position in Hindustan Mahabat made the Emperor resume his journey to Kabul. Outwardly everything seemed well under Mahabat's grip in reality a section of the nobles and officers resented his growing power. Victory of Mahabat was yet not final all it needed was a spark and that came in the form of a scuffle between Mahabat's Rajput and Ahadi troopers.

The reason of the quarrel was a minor scuffle, which grew to gigantic proportions and led to defeat of Rajputs with general uprising against Mahabat's forces in Afghanistan. However, normalcy was soon restored but Mahabat lost many of his trusted aids in this incident. Thus the situation became favorable for Nurjahan to throw off the yoke of general's power. She cleverly told Jahangir to win Mahabat's trust by sweet words and

⁸⁰ Ibid:6.424

⁸¹ Dow 1973: 3.89

⁸² Khan 1865: 6.428

⁸³ Prasad 1922: 404

convince him of his happiness at the current state of matters. The seasoned statesman was duped and the Rajput guard of Jahangir was considerably reduced.⁸⁴ All this while Nurjahan was playing her cards very well by winning to her side those nobles who were against Mahabat. According to Beni Prasad, “she cajoled the unwilling; she bribed the greedy; she strengthened the wavering; she held out promises to all... and organized a great conspiracy.”⁸⁵ During all this while Nurjahan’s men were secretly employed in the Royal service. Once she became confident of her preparations the uprising took place. On their return journey from Kabul to Lahore when the retinue was at a day’s distance from Rohtas the plan was put to work.

Jahangir sent the word to Mahabat that his daily parade for that morning should be postponed because he wanted to inspect the cavalry of Nurjahan. Mahabat agreed and thus the Royal party proceeded towards Rohtas where a court was waiting for them. Hence ended the sway of Mahabat Khan and Jahangir retained his freedom⁸⁶ Immediately orders were sent to Mahabat to release Asaf Khan from his captivity and himself move towards Thatta. Initially hesitant Mahabat finally released Asaf Khan after swearing him an oath of allegiance to him. In the retrospect we can say that Mahabat did act seditiously and captured power for some time, but perhaps it was more or less the only option left with him to safeguard his own honor and life. Nurjahan on her part again displayed the most striking aspect of her personality-survival instinct. With whatever resources she had she staged a marvelous comeback on the political scene. However the rebellion of Mahabat Khan eventually sealed her chances in the subsequent war of succession among Jahangir’s sons.⁸⁷ For Mahabat Khan now sat in the lap of Asaf Khan and Shahjahan. Had Nurjahan not driven the competent general into rebellion, perhaps her contender Shahryar would not have lost the war of succession to Shahjahan so easily as he eventually did.

Once the rebellion of Mahabat Khan was quelled it seemed that everything would come back to normal but destiny had some other plans. Jahangir’s health started failing rapidly even the cold climate of Kashmir could offer him no respite. His condition worsened with

⁸⁴ Prasad 1922: 408-09

⁸⁵ Ibid:409

⁸⁶ Khan 1865: 6.430

⁸⁷ Findly 1993: 274

every passing day so much so that he could not afford to ride on horseback but had to use palanquin for his conveyance.⁸⁸ However the end came on October 28, 1627 and Jahangir bid adieu to this world aged fifty eight.⁸⁹ The death of Emperor was marked by hectic political activity on part of his sons and their partisans. Jahangir was survived by only two sons- His third son Khurram and his youngest son Shahryar born to a concubine. On the day of Jahangir's death itself Nurjahan convened a meeting with the nobles. However her plans were foiled by Asaf Khan who made excuses and did not let the meeting materialize on one pretext or the other. In the meantime Asaf Khan kept Nurjahan under house-arrest and sent a fast runner Banarsi with his ring to Shahjahan in the far Deccan informing him about the demise of his father.⁹⁰

However Asaf Khan knew too well that the imperial throne could not lie vacant for long and as a scapegoat he put Khusrau's son Dawar Bakhsh on the throne of Hindustan. Although Nurjahan was confined in her quarters she still managed to send message to her son-in-law Shahryar in Lahore to gather men and come to her aid. This is known to be the last political move of the widowed queen. When Shahryar received the news of his father's demise instigated "by his intriguing wife"⁹¹ he declared himself the new emperor. Eventually a battle was fought between joint forces of Asaf Khan and Dawar Bakhsh on one side against Shahryar and Daniyal's son Mirza Bayasanghar on the other side. The forces of Shahryar could not withstand the imperial army and were routed in the battle. When Shahryar got to know this he sought refuge in the harem but was brought out from there by Asaf Khan's men, sent into prison and blinded.

Meanwhile the swift runner Banarsi reached Shahjahan at Junnar on November 18, 1627. After observing the ritual mourning ecstatic Shahjahan proceeded towards Agra. However what he did next was against all norms of imperial or human conduct. To ensure the stability of his reign he sent orders to Asaf Khan to kill Shahryar, Dawar Bakhsh, and two surviving sons of Daniyal, Tahmuras and Hoshang.⁹² On January 23, 1627 Asaf Khan

⁸⁸ Prasad 1922: 421

⁸⁹ Khan 1865: 6.436

⁹⁰ Ibid: 6.436

⁹¹ E&D 1873: 6.436

⁹² E&D 1873: 6.438

obliged by the imperial command and all the remaining contenders to the Mughal throne were put to death.⁹³ On February 1628 Shahjahan was proclaimed as the new emperor of Mughal dynasty. With this came to an end the period of Nurjahan's sway and hence onwards she was to live as a pensioner at Lahore till her death in 1645.

6.5 Influential Women of Shahjahan's Time

6.5.1 Mumtaz Mahal

Definition of love was very different in those times as compared to the ones that we live in. Conjugal fidelity was not known in the polygamous households of medieval world. However, strangely the most beautiful structure dedicated to love in history belongs to that period. The Taj Mahal stands as a proof of a husband's true love for his favorite wife. What makes this wonder in marble all the more endearing is the fact that the man behind this masterpiece Shahjahan is notoriously famous in history for his philanderings and sexually unrestricted behavior.⁹⁴ In fact in the entire lifespan of the Mughal dynasty no other ruler has been charged with the heinous crime of incest except this monarch. It is interesting to know that what could have prompted the philandering Shahjahan to construct the finest mausoleum in memory of his wife of 19 years. There must have been some exceptional qualities about his wife Arjumand Banu Begum that rendered her so dear to her husband.

Mumtaz Mahal was born to Asaf Khan, *wazir* of Mughal Empire and brother of another celebrated Mughal consort Nurjahan. Her real name was Arjumand Banu Begum but she is better known in history as Mumtaz Mahal or lady of the Taj.⁹⁵ Though unlike her aunt Nurjahan she is not known to have directly involved herself in the matters of statecraft and politics but as the beloved queen of the emperor of Hindustan she was able to influence the contemporary politics in one way or the other. During the revolt of Shahjahan she not only uncomplainingly bore the hardships of battle and life with her husband but also had to bear separation from her two sons Dara and Aurangjeb who were sent as hostages to Nurjahan. All in all she stood like a pillar of strength beside her husband during thick and thin.

⁹³ Findly 1993: 284

⁹⁴ early, 305

⁹⁵ Mukerjee 2001: 147

Naturally on Shahjahan's accession to the throne she was elevated to the position of Malika-i-Zaman better known as Mumtaz Mahal, the title given to her by Shahjahan on his accession in 1628⁹⁶ She reigned supreme in the zenana. Among all the wives of Shahjahan, Mumtaz Mahal was his undisputed favorite and remained so till the very end of her life in 1631

Shahjahan reposed unbounded faith and trust in Mumtaz which is evident from the entrustment of the royal seal to her.⁹⁷ He is known to have consulted his chief queen on all the important matters of life both public and private.⁹⁸ Few people hold Mumtaz Mahal responsible for the religious orthodoxy of early part of Shahjahan's reign which mellowed down with time chiefly owing to the influence of his eclectic son Dara Shukoh. However we do not find many takers of this theory for Shahjahan was no Jahangir and he was certainly aware of the ill effects of excessive female role in politics.⁹⁹ Another accusation levied upon Mumtaz Mahal was the persecution of Portuguese in Hugli done at her provocation. It so happened that during Shahjahan's revolt against his father the Portuguese had not only been unsupportive of the rebel prince but had insulted him by capturing few of his assets including two female slave girls of his wife Mumtaz Mahal. On his accession to the Mughal throne Shahjahan avenged the humiliation by massacring the Portuguese of Hugli en masse. Among the contemporary writers Manucci holds Mumtaz Mahal responsible for Shahjahan's anti-Portuguese policy.

Mumtaz Mahal's indirect involvement in political affairs can be seen from the power she exercised over Shahjahan, which led him to pardon many a serious offenders. One such famous instance is of Saif Khan, governor of Gujarat who was pardoned by the Mughal monarch on the insistence of his favorite wife. Saif Khan's wife was Mumtaz Mahal's sister and owing to sisterly affection she asked for Emperor's mercy. The end result was Shahjahan sparing him from rigors of punishment.¹⁰⁰ Mumtaz Mahal often gets lesser recognition in the pages of history as compared to her aunt Nurjahan and daughter Jahanara

⁹⁶ Lahori 1867: op.cit.,pt I 92.96

⁹⁷ Prasad 342

⁹⁸ Devee 1918:25

⁹⁹ Pant 1930:175

¹⁰⁰ Saksena 1968: 61

perhaps because of shorter length of her life. However, her memory lingers on undiminished for that ‘bubble in marble’ and will remain so till posterity as the lady of the Taj.

6.5.2 Jahanara

Jahanara Begum popularly known as Begum Sahab was the favorite child of her father Shahjahan and favorite sister of her father’s choice to the throne of India- Dara Shukoh. During the war of succession between the four sons of Shahjahan the imperial family had been divided into two hostile camps. While one group consisted of Shahjahan, Jahanara and Dara in the other group were Aurangjeb and his sister Roshanara. Hence we see two daughters of Shahjahan playing a very important role during the war of succession and general politics.¹⁰¹ Jahanara and Dara shared the same wavelength in terms of socio-religious beliefs as both of them were deeply steeped in Sufi doctrine and philosophy. In Jahanara’s opinion her eclectic brother Dara was a much better candidate for the throne of Hindustan than the puritanical Aurangjeb.¹⁰² Though she favored Dara she did not harbor acrimony towards Aurangjeb either. In fact on many occasion she took his side and intervened in policy matters so that Shahjahan did not resort to inflicting severe punishment upon him.¹⁰³

In 1644 when Aurangjeb either had resigned or was removed from the vice-royalty of Deccan by his father it was Jahanara who using her influence over Shahjahan helped him get reinstated to his previous position. After the early and unexpected death of her mother Mumtaz Mahal she had to shoulder the responsibility of imperial harem at the tender age of seventeen and the first big responsibility that she fulfilled was that of solemnizing the marriage of her brother Dara to her uncle Parvez’s daughter Iffat Banu¹⁰⁴. Jahanara was loved by the general public also. Even the foreign travelers from the period like Bernier and Manucci praise her for her qualities and amiable nature. The hold and sway of Jahanara Begum over the imperial family is voiced through a letter written by her to Aurangjeb

¹⁰¹ Mukerjee 2001:149

¹⁰² Ibid:149

¹⁰³ Lal 1988: 96

¹⁰⁴ Qazwini 500

admonishing him for his rebellion against imperial power, “The emperor was in actual control of the state affairs and he devotes the whole of his time to looking after the welfare of his subjects and to propagating religion...It is against all canons of wisdom and foresight to fight the eldest prince, you should observe the path of loyalty and obedience and should stop at the place whither you have arrived.”¹⁰⁵

The contemporary records inform us that unlike her younger sister Roshanara Begum this elder child of Shahjahan was less inclined towards political matters but the situations took such a turn that she got involved in the ugly war of succession. However her role was chiefly to pacify the raging tempers on all the sides and as a seasoned family matriarch she tried to resolve the matters peacefully. However she remained unsuccessful in her endeavor and the war of succession among Shahjahan’s sons claimed many unnecessary lives. From a very young age Dara was dear to his father unlike Aurangzeb who was often at the receiving end for his rash and inappropriate ways. Jahanara saved him many times from their father’s wrath. Jahanara did want her favorite Dara to ascend to the throne of India but she did not mean to harm Aurangzeb also. She only disliked his reactionary attitude and intolerance, which according to her did not render him a suitable candidate for Hindustan’s sovereign ship.

Towards the end of 1657 Shahjahan’s health started deteriorating faster. This automatically fuelled political activity among his four sons who were all grown up men and aspired to Emperorship. Among them Dara and Aurangzeb had the brightest chances of realizing their dreams. Jahanara and Dara Shukoh tried to hide the fact of Shahjahan’s ill health from the other three contenders to the throne. Jahanara in fact sent separate letters to Murad, Shuja and Aurangzeb in this regard. However, the trick didn’t work out given the fact that the princes had their sources of information at the Royal court. While Roshanara was secretly in correspondence with Aurangzeb, her other sister Gauharara was sending all the information to Murad.¹⁰⁶ For the shrewd politician that Aurangzeb was, he formed a dual alliance with his brothers Shuja and Murad and kept them in dark about his intentions to grab the throne for himself. Many battles were fought

¹⁰⁵ Khan 1946: 16-17

¹⁰⁶ Mukerjee 2001: 151

between the imperial forces in support of Dara and the joint forces of the other contenders to the throne. After his defeat in the decisive battle of Samugarh against Aurangzeb on 28 May 1658, Dara fled and wandered from one place to another hotly chased by Aurangzeb's officers.¹⁰⁷

While this defeat forced Shahjahan to concede defeat and surrender to his son, Jahanara refused to give up and kept providing aid to the fugitive Dara in the form of money and elephants.¹⁰⁸ At the same time she visited her younger brother in person and tried to persuade him to not only give up his agenda of acquiring kingship but rather accept the division of the empire between all his brothers as per the old Timurid custom. She also promised him to be given the title of Buland Iqbal which earlier lay with Dara.¹⁰⁹ However the ambitious prince refused to obey and Jahanara had to return empty-handed. Though apprised by his sister Roshanara and Khalilullah Khan about the conspiracy hatched to kill him on his entering Shahjahan's quarters by his Tartar slave women¹¹⁰ Aurangzeb decided to go to Agra in order to meet his ailing father. However, he was stopped by Shayista Khan and Sheikh Mir from doing so informing him of the controversy hatched against him by his father moreover a *farman* of Shahjahan written to Dara fell in Aurangzeb's hand which confirmed his suspicions and he gave up his plans to meet Shahjahan.

Thus ended any chance of reconciliation between Aurangzeb and his father. The fort of Agra had already been seized and Shahjahan remained a captive there till the end of his life on 22 January 1666.¹¹¹ All this while he was faithfully served by his loving daughter Jahanara Begum. The affection with which she served her father only helped reduce the pain that Shahjahan had suffered at the hands of his ungrateful son Aurangzeb. Had it been not for Jahanara the last eight years of Shahjahan's life spent in captivity amidst all the insults and pain inflicted upon him courtesy his son Aurangzeb would have become unbearable for him. All the contemporary Indian and foreign travelers have testified to Jahanara's love and affection towards her father. In this regard Bernier notes, "Shahjahan reposed unbounded confidence in this favorite child; she watched over his safety, and was

¹⁰⁷ Saksena 1968: 333

¹⁰⁸ Bernier 1934: 65

¹⁰⁹ Khan 1990: 553

¹¹⁰ Saksena 1968: 332

¹¹¹ Saksena 1968: 332

so cautiously observant that no dish was permitted to appear upon the royal table which had not been prepared under her superintendence.”¹¹² She tried her level best to avert the unnecessary bloodshed on the event of accession but it was not meant to be. Jahanara’s name will always be remembered in history for her political sagacity, wisdom and as an epitome of filial sentiments.

6.5.3 Roshanara

Shahjahan’s younger daughter Roshanara was a more willing participant in the political affairs as she had always resented the influence and power of her elder sister Jahanara .She was a crafty and ruthless woman who not only incited Aurangzeb to execute the *infidel* Dara¹¹³ but also threw a lavish feast to celebrate his miserable death. The war of succession provided the ambitious younger daughter of Shahjahan with the opportunity to settle scores with her elder sister who had been the apple of her father’s eyes. Unlike her elder sister this lady had no intellectual pretensions and was more inclined toward the pleasures of a material life. After his accession to the throne Aurangzeb rewarded his sister for the support given by her during the war of succession. Therefore while Roshanara gloated in wealth and luxury of imperial harem her unfortunate sister Jahanara spent her days confined in the Agra fort with her father. At this moment in history it seemed that Roshanara had taken revenge from her sister but the destiny had something else in store for her.¹¹⁴

When Aurangzeb fell seriously ill in 1662 Roshanara tried to assume all the royal power even the royal seal was occupied by her. She tried to propose the case of Aurangzeb’s nine year old son Azam and even misbehaved with Muazzam and his mother. On his recovery from illness two months later when Aurangzeb came to know about his elder sister’s behavior she fell from his eyes but keeping in mind her erstwhile help he chose to keep quiet. However Roshanara could never rise to her former position. After the death of their father Shahjahan in 1666, Aurangzeb visited his grief-stricken sister Jahanara at the Agra fort.¹¹⁵ The elder sister welcomed her emperor brother warmly and gifted her a golden basin

¹¹² Bernier 1934: 12

¹¹³ Hansen 1973:448-52

¹¹⁴ Lal 1988: 99

¹¹⁵ Eraly 1997:380

on this occasion. She was once again appointed as the Padshah Begum and the beautiful mansion of Ali Mardan Khan in Delhi was assigned for her residence. This new turn of events naturally receded the younger sister Roshanara to the background and she passed the remaining years of her life in relative obscurity till her death in 1671, life indeed had come a full circle for the two sisters.¹¹⁶

6.6 Influential Women of Aurangjeb's Time

6.6.1 Zeb-un-Nisa and Zinat-un-Nisa

Aurangjeb was an astute and shrewd diplomat and it was not possible to influence him in the matters of state policy. His sisters Jahanara and Roshanara had greatly influenced the early part of his life especially during the war of succession and he had received unflinching support from his younger sister Roshanara while the elder one chose to be with Dara. However, none of his wives attained a stature like that of Nurjahan or Mumtaz Mahal still he was under the influence of his concubine Udaipuri Mahal during his old age. Like Jahanara and Roshanara in the preceding reign two of his daughters did play some role in contemporary politics. These ladies were Zeb-un-Nisa and Zinat-un-Nisa. In keeping with the Mughal tradition where favored female relations of the monarch sought pardon for offenders using their close proximity with the ruling sovereign. Zeb-un-Nisa too on her part saved many people from the wrath of Aurangjeb from time to time. The list of beneficiaries ranged from her grandfather Shah Nawaz Khan who had been imprisoned by Aurangjeb for not lending any help during the war of succession¹¹⁷ to her rebel brother Prince Akbar.

However the love and affection of Aurangjeb for his favorite child did not last long. During Prince Akbar's revolt against his father in 1681, Zeb-un-Nisa is not only known to have sympathized with his cause but also written letters to him in this regard. When the prince's rebellion was crushed and his camp was being checked many letters of Zeb-un-Nisa written to him were found. Aurangjeb did not forgive his daughter for this mistake and having

¹¹⁶ Eraly 1997: 380

¹¹⁷ Mishra 1967:50

seized all her property and assets imprisoned her in the fort of Salimgarh at Delhi where she lived a miserable life till her death in 1702 A.D.¹¹⁸ Few sources mention about Zeb-un-Nisa's liking for Maratha chief Shivaji and even credit her with his safe exit from Aurangzeb's captivity in Agra.¹¹⁹ Aurangzeb's decision to imprison Zeb-un-Nisa was perhaps also due to her pro Shivaji sentiments.¹²⁰ Anyhow the talented and beautiful Zeb-un-Nisa Begum had a tragic end. She had to pass many years in the confinement of prison and after her death this brave lady was buried in the Zinat-ul-Masjid at Delhi.¹²¹

Another influential woman in the life of Aurangzeb is concerned was his daughter Zinat-un-Nisa who was elevated to the status of Padshah Begum. This Mughal princess headed her father's harem in the Deccan for many years. In fact Zinat-un-Nisa was made in-charge of the duty of taking care of Shahuji and his widowed mother Yesu Bai.¹²² The lady is said to have harbored a soft corner for Marathas and reportedly saved the young Shahuji from her father's rage many a time. In fact she later helped in Balaji Vishwanath's endeavor to free the Maratha scion from Mughal captivity.

6.7 Social Activities of Mughal Women

The Mughal women played an important part in enriching the social fabric of the country by sometimes enthusiastically contributing towards all forms of artistic activity and on others directly participating in it. The Mughal age is marked by tremendous progress made in the fields of Arts and culture. All the Mughal men and women were keen connoisseurs of both fine and practical arts and helped in their propagation. They have left indelible mark over various spheres of cultural life like architecture, painting, music, cuisine, and dress etc.¹²³ In the following pages we will try to find out the exact nature of Mughal queen's and princesses' contribution in the various spheres of social activity.

¹¹⁸ Mathur 1964: 49

¹¹⁹ Devee 1918: 60-61

¹²⁰ Zebunnisa 1913:17

¹²¹ Khan 1954:51-52

¹²² Sardesai 1946:I.350

¹²³ Mukerjee 2001: 226

6.7.1 Architecture

Mughals were great builders and in their more than 300 year rule the entire landscape of India came to be dotted with magnificent buildings. Like their men the Mughal ladies have also been instrumental in furthering the cause of building activity in the country.¹²⁴ Women like Haji Begum, Nurjahan, Jahanara and Zeb-un-Nisa have been a few prominent names who left their mark in the field of building activity. These women not only used their private resources to construct these buildings but also invested their creativity and artistic acumen towards the construction of many beautiful specimen of rich architectural merit. As far as Babur's women are concerned none of them is known to have contributed to the field of architecture. The first Royal Mughal lady to associate herself with building activity on a wide scale was Humayun's widow Haji Begum or Bega Begum¹²⁵ who constructed the famous Tomb of Humayun at Delhi.

6.7.2 Haji Begum's Architectural Contribution

6.7.2.1 *Humayun's Tomb*

The construction of Humayun's tomb began under the reign of his son Akbar by his widow Haji Begum in 1560.¹²⁶ This final resting place of the second Mughal Humayun is considered to be the precursor of the Taj Mahal.¹²⁷ To Percy Brown Humayun's tomb "is not only one of the most arresting examples of the building art in India but it is also an outstanding landmark in the development of the Mughal style."¹²⁸ Haji Begum is also known to have constructed the Arban Sarai making her the first Royal lady to have ventured in the construction of works of public utility. The women in Akbar's time did not take up any noticeable construction activity. It is to Jahangir's celebrated consort Nurjahan that the credit of large scale building work goes.

¹²⁴ Mukerjee 2001: 193

¹²⁵ Begum 1994:219

¹²⁶ Crowe & Haywood 1973:71

¹²⁷ Fergusson 1967: 2.290

¹²⁸ Brown 1981: 96

6.7.3 Nurjahan's Architectural Contribution

The exceptionally talented Nurjahan whom Jahangir made a partner of his life in 1611 A.D. was the unquestioned forerunner in the field of construction activity. She has carved a niche for herself in the pages of history owing to her manifold contribution to various forms of art. However, her most lasting contribution lies in the field of architecture where she has to her credit construction of many glorious tombs, solemn mosques, lavish caravan sarais and beautiful gardens. The brilliance and singular beauty of these buildings eloquently testifies to the refined feminine taste of their creator. In a way these stone edifices have bestowed posterity to the name of Nurjahan. The fine detailing and intricate craftsmanship of these structures introduce us to the true personality of Jahangir's favorite wife.¹²⁹ Nurjahan has been one of the most controversial figures of Mughal history. No other woman has incited the kind of romance, intrigue, and mystery as this celebrated lady. History has indeed judged her at extreme lengths. While few projected her as epitome of womanhood others demonized her to inordinate levels. However, her architectural achievements have come down to us unadulterated and unrefined by the judgment of scholars of history. It is in fact these buildings that give us a sneak peek into the inner realm of this wonder of woman called Nurjahan.

6.7.3.1 Tomb of Itimad-ud-Daulah

Among all the constructional achievements of Nurjahan¹³⁰ the tomb of Itimad-ud-Daulah is unquestionably her most lasting contribution to the field of architecture. Situated on the banks of river Yamuna at Agra this building is the final resting place of Ghiyas Beg aka Itimad-ud- Daulah, the renowned Mughal noble, and father of Nurjahan Begum. Constructed over a period of six years (1622-1628) at a whopping sum of nearly 10 million rupees,¹³¹ this garden tomb is one of the most exquisite Jahangiri Buildings. As for the layout of the tomb it is situated on a raised platform in the middle of a garden enclosed by

¹²⁹ Findly 1993: 218

¹³⁰ Jahangir 1989: 2.150-51

¹³¹ Laet 1974: 41

a 540 feet high wall on all the four sides.¹³² The two- storey building is flanked by four octagonal towers at the four corners. In the upper storey lie false graves of Itimad-ud-Daulah and his wife Asmat Begum while the real ones lie exactly at the same spot on the lower storey.

Besides being the first Mughal building in India made entirely out of white marble another striking feature of this tomb garden is its decoration. As intricate *pietra dura* inlay work has been profusely used to beautify the surface of this building.¹³³ Pietra dura was a technique of laying semi-precious stones in the geometric hollow spaces etched on white marble. According to some sources this technique was outsourced from Florence in Italy. While few other sources credit the Indian hands for this style of decoration.¹³⁴ Here it becomes pertinent to note that the building's of Jahangir's period including the Tomb of his father-in-Law mark a transition phase from the more solid red sandstone buildings of Akbar to the sensual opulence of Shahjahan's marble buildings. Use of white marble as the building medium was first begun in Jahangir's time, which became a permanent feature of his son Shahjahan's buildings. In fact many red sandstone buildings of earlier period were reclad in white marble during this period. The tomb of Sheikh Salim Chishti for instance was one such building that was redone in 1605-1606 at the time of Jahangir's accession to the throne.¹³⁵

In few other respects also the tomb of Ghiyas Beg seems to have hit new grounds. The use of white marble as medium of construction and use of intricate *pietra dura* technique have already been discussed. The four attached octagonal towers lying on the four sides of the main structure are a departure from the earlier Mughal practice of constructing quoins in the central grave chamber. Likewise the perfection attained by this building with regard to color remains unparalleled in history of Mughal architecture in India. Praising the beauty of this tomb garden Percy Brown has noted that, "There is no other building like it in the entire range of Mughal architecture, the delicacy of treatment, and the chaste quality of its

¹³² Fergusson 1967: 2.305

¹³³ Gascogine 1971:159

¹³⁴ Gascogine 1971:159-160

¹³⁵ Findly 1988:233

decoration placing it in a class by itself.”¹³⁶

Nur Mahal Sarai, Jalandhar

As mentioned earlier Nurjahan took active part in economic activity also and her ships participated in trade with distant nations of the world. During the Mughal age great advancement took place both in the field of internal as well as external trade.¹³⁷ At the time of his accession to the throne Jahangir took many steps to ensure the safety and comfort of the weary travelers and soldiers. To this affect many roads were constructed, shady trees were planted, wells were dug out on the roadside, and sarais or rest houses were made. After her marriage with Jahangir in 1611 Nurjahan actively participated in state affairs. She not only interfered in political affairs but ventured into trade also. As part of extensive building activity undertaken by her caravan sarais were constructed. The most notable is the one constructed near Jalandhar in Punjab called the Nur Mahal Sarai.¹³⁸ Both known for its importance as a work of public use and architectural merit.

The sarai is constructed over an area of 551 square feet flanked by four minarets on the four sides. The western gateway more famously called the Lahore gateway is made up of red sandstone. The façade of the entry point is variously embellished with sculpted relief consisting of elephants, peacocks, lions, birds, lotus flower, and other such more Hindu themes. Another notable feature of this building is the inscription engraved over the entrance to the main gateway, which reads as follows:

1. During the just rule of Jahangir Shah, son of Akbar Shah, whose like neither heaven nor earth remembers.
2. The Nur Saray was founded in the district of Phalor by command of that angel, Nurjahan Begum.
3. The poet happily discovered the date of its foundation: this Saray was founded by Nurjahan Begum 1028.

¹³⁶ Burn 1937: 4.552-53

¹³⁷ Mukerjee 2001: 197

¹³⁸ Mukerjee 2001: ibid

4. Knowledge of the date of its completion was found in the words; “This Saray was erected by Nurjahan Begum”¹⁰³⁰.¹³⁹ The sarai was raised at a place of strategic importance for the Mughals. It had the capacity to hold up to hundred people at one time. Provided with a well, bath house and mosque this place was an architectural achievement of its creator. Jahangir visited this place for the first time in 1620 along with his wife Nurjahan and kept coming back. He is said to have been impressed by the construction of this place.¹⁴⁰ We hear of another Nur Mahal Sarai at Agra, which would have been most probably a copy of the original one at Jalandhar. Peter Mundy reportedly stayed at this place during his visit to Agra. He remarked, “This Sarai is a very faire one, built by the old Queene Noore mohol...It stands between two gardens also made by her.”¹⁴¹

Patthar Masjid, Srinagar

Besides laying many beautiful gardens in the Kashmir valley Nurjahan Begum is credited with the construction of a mosque also variously known as Nau Masjid, Shahi Masjid and Patthar Masjid. The Mosque marks a departure from the earlier practice of using wood as the medium of construction and replaces it with locally available grey limestone. The frontal façade of Pathar Masjid consists of a central arched portico flanked by four arches on each side.¹⁴² There is a strange story related to the later disuse and abandonment of this mosque. According to this almost mythical story on the completion of this mosque when Nurjahan was asked about the cost of its construction, the lady supposedly pointed towards her shoes and replied “as much as that”. Enraged by this reply the clerics prohibited the use of this Mosque for religious purpose. Whether true or not this story has come to be associated as a valid explanation for the abandonment of Pathar Masjid and its subsequent use as a granary.¹⁴³

Nurjahan's Tomb, Lahore

Tomb of Nurjahan is situated at Shahadra near that of her husband Jahangir's mausoleum. We already know that the favorite queen of Jahangir was forced to live the last 18 years of

¹³⁹ Pant 1978: 199

¹⁴⁰ Findly 1988: 230

¹⁴¹ Mundy 1914:2.78-79

¹⁴² Findly 1993: 239

¹⁴³ Shujaiddins 1967: 44

her life in exile at Lahore at an allowance of rupees two lakh per year.¹⁴⁴ From 1627 A.D. to 1645 A.D. the last years of her life were spent in relative obscurity. Of this time very little is known about her except that she would spend her time engaged in works of charity and religious activity. Under the reign of her staunch enemy Shahjahan meticulous steps was taken to wipe out every memory of her erstwhile rule. Most of her tomb was completed by the time of her death in 1645. Though it lacks the opulence and grandeur of her father's tomb at Agra but still it is a fine resting place for one of the biggest female names of Indian history. Given the kind of animosity that had brewed between Nurjahan and her stepson during the final years of Jahangir's reign the entire expenditure of Nurjahan's tomb was born by the dowager queen herself.

The work over this final resting place of Jahangir's last wife was begun in 1641 A.D. and by the time of Nurjahan's death in 1645 it stood mostly completed. As for the general plan of the mausoleum it was constructed in the famous *charbagh* style. The tomb stands amidst a garden divided into four equal sized squares by the water channels and hence was called charbagh. The entire garden area was studded with beautiful and sweet smelling trees like jasmine, tulips, lily, roses and cypresses.¹⁴⁵ The front of the mausoleum had one central arch surrounded by three arches on each side. There were four attached octagonal towers at the four corners of the main building. In the grave chamber there is a platform on which lie buried Nurjahan and her daughter Ladli Begum surrounded by arches on all sides. As far as the decoration of the tomb is concerned the tomb definitely lacks the pomp and élan of Itimad-ud-Daulah's tomb.

While the Agra tomb is profusely decorated with pietra dura inlay work, what we find here is printed patterns. Perhaps owing to her hostility with the new monarch as well as limited resources she could not raise her sepulcher the way she did her fathers'.¹⁴⁶ However the tomb has greatly succumbed to the ravages of time and as it stands in a restored form today we can only guess how it would have looked in its original form. The Persian couplet etched on the cenotaph of Nurjahan read as follows:

¹⁴⁴ E&D 1873: 7.70

¹⁴⁵ Findly 1993: 241

¹⁴⁶ Ibid: 242

*“Bar mazar-i-manghariban
Ne chiragh-i-ne gule,
Ne pare-parvana sozad
Ne sada-i-bulbule”¹⁴⁷*

Given hereunder is the English translation of the above verse:

*Let there be neither a light nor a flower
On the grave of this humble person,
Nor the wings of the moth burn
Nor the bulbul send out his wailing cry*

Jahangir’s Tomb, Lahore

While few scholars of history have attributed the design and construction of Jahangir’s tomb to his wife Nurjahan in totality¹⁴⁸ Modern writers on the subject like Ellison Banks Findly have claimed it to be partially inspired by the Queen dowager given the limited freedom of choice and expression that the widow of Jahangir enjoyed during the time her late husband’s mausoleum was taking shape.¹⁴⁹ She argues that Nurjahan must have frequented the site of her dead husband’s grave and seen the construction work from close quarters but the final say in the matters of design, construction and overall planning would not have been entirely hers as we know that Jahangir’s mausoleum was raised at imperial expense with Shahjahan’s approval. In any case we can’t deny that Nurjahan played a significant role in the design and conceptualizing of the building as there is striking similarity between the tombs of Jahangir, Itimad-ud-Daulah and her own.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Lal 1988: 83

¹⁴⁸ Fergusson 1967: 2.304; Jaffar 1972: 107

¹⁴⁹ Findly 1993: 240

¹⁵⁰ Stuart 1913: 131

Situated at Shahadra near Lahore this tomb has close similarity with the tombs of Itimad-ud- Daulah and Akbar at Agra and Sikandra respectively. The mausoleum of Jahangir stands on a low-rising platform measuring 256 square feet. The mausoleum is made up of red sandstone with inlay work in marble.¹⁵¹ The sarcophagus is made of chaste white marble embellished with pietra dura inlay work. The building has no dome over it and we don't know for certain that whether there was any dome or it was later destroyed by maurauders. However it is a known fact that much of the marble from this Mughal tomb was taken away by Maharaja Ranjit Singh for the purpose of constructing his own buildings.¹⁵²

6.7.4 Architectural achievements of Shahjahan's wives

Few mosques and works of public utility were constructed by the women of Shahjahan. Both His secondary wives Akbarabadi Mahal and Fatehpuri Mahal are credited with the construction of two mosques named after them. Akbarabadi Mahal also constructed a sarai and *baoli*.¹⁵³ While Sarhindi Begum was behind the construction of Sarhindi Mosque at Delhi.

6.7.5 Architectural contribution of Princess Jahanara

Jahanara Begum was an artistically inclined cultured lady with diversified interests. She has to her credit construction of mosques, sarais, and markets besides her own tomb at Delhi.

6.7.5.1 Mosques

Jahanara was responsible for the construction of a mosque at Kashmir built in honor of a learned man called Mulla Shah Badakhshani.¹⁵⁴ Another mosque was built by the eldest daughter of Shahjahan at Agra called as the Jami Masjid.¹⁵⁵ The expenses incurred on the construction of both these mosques were born by Jahanara Begum's personal purse.

Sarai

¹⁵¹ Mukerjee 2001: 200

¹⁵² Burn 1937: 4.151

¹⁵³ Dayal: 1982:71

¹⁵⁴ Khan 1990: 458

¹⁵⁵ Lahori 1867: 1.252

Jahanara constructed a sarai at Delhi, which was known for its spaciousness, and safety provisions. Bernier has heaped great praise on this structure. Unfortunately this structure was destroyed in the revolt of 1857.¹⁵⁶

Bazaars

A novel enterprise on the part of Begum Sahab was to venture into the field of constructing market places. Something, which even her enterprising step grandmother Nurjahan refrained from doing. Two such hubs of great commercial activity came up in Lahore and Delhi known as Chawk Sarai Bazaar¹⁵⁷ and Chandni Chowk Bazaar¹⁵⁸ respectively.

Jahanara's Sepulcher

Jahanara Begum's tomb situated in the shrine of Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya is a somber one with no paraphernalia. The simple white marble grave of the Mughal princess lies open to the skies with no dome or canopy raised over it.

6.7.6 Architectural contribution of Princess Roshanara

Jahanara's younger sister Roshanara Begum constructed her mausoleum at Delhi. This is a beautiful white marble building with exquisite ornamentation work.¹⁵⁹ Another daughter of Shahjahan named Purnhara Banu is known to have built her tomb before her death.¹⁶⁰

6.7.7 Architectural contribution of Princess Zeb-un-Nisa

Aurangzeb's daughter Zeb-un-Nisa is known to have constructed the gardens of Char Burji and Nawan Kot in Lahore. She constructed her own mausoleum at Nawan Kot. However, unfortunately it couldn't become her final resting place as owing to her sympathies with Prince Akbar her Father Aurangzeb ordered Zeb-un-Nisa to be imprisoned at the Salimgarh

¹⁵⁶ Mukerjee 2001: 202

¹⁵⁷ Kambu 1923: 3.47

¹⁵⁸ Mukerjee 2001: 202

¹⁵⁹ Stuart 1913: 109-110

¹⁶⁰ Sarkar 1947:90

fort (Delhi). It was here that this tragic figure found its final resting place.¹⁶¹

6.7.8 Architectural contribution of Princess Zinat-un-Nisa

This second daughter of Aurangjeb was behind the construction of around fourteen sarais.¹⁶² The Zinat-ul-Masjid at Delhi was constructed by her. After her death this daughter of Aurangjeb was buried here but the Britishers are said to have removed the coffin from its final resting place and shifted it elsewhere when they took hold of the place.

6.8 Garden Laying Activity of Mughal Ladies

All the Mughals were great admirers of natural beauty and their central Asian roots greatly prompted their desire to lay lavish gardens and garden tombs. In this field both Mughal men and women participated enthusiastically.¹⁶³ In Persia the art of garden laying had reached its zenith during this time and Mughals brought those rich traditions to India with them. India with its wide variety of flora and fauna became a fertile breeding ground for the culmination of Mughal style of garden laying with Hindu influence. Over a period of time the vast expanses of India came to be dotted with numerous beautiful gardens. Chief Mughal territories and cities like Kashmir, Kabul, Delhi, Lahore and Agra became home to many of these exotic gardens. Kashmir remained the mother of them all as it remained the quintessential favorite site for garden laying among the Mughals owing to its natural beauty and rich foliage.¹⁶⁴ Ever since the inception of Mughal rule in India Royal women actively participated in the garden laying enterprise. They not only designed them but also supervised the construction process through capable men who looked after both the construction phase and supervised general upkeep of these gardens.

¹⁶¹ Lal 1988: 119

¹⁶² Misra 1967:112

¹⁶³ Mukerjee 2001: 205

¹⁶⁴ Ibid:207

6.8.1 Baburi Gardens

6.8.1.1 Zahara Bagh, Agra

In India Zahara Bagh is the first garden, which was constructed for a Mughal lady. This Garden located at Agra was built by first Mughal emperor Babur for one of his daughters named Zahara.¹⁶⁵ However this *bagh* can't be treated as a direct contribution of a Mughal woman in the field of garden laying.

6.8.2 Humayuni Gardens

6.8.2.1 Humayun's Garden Tomb, Delhi

Humayun's widow Haji Begum constructed the tomb of her husband, which has the distinction of being the first major Mughal garden tomb in India. Constructed in the typical charbagh style it was originally laid with trees and sweet-smelling flowers of all kind, which are no longer found there. However the general structure has not been changed over the period of time.¹⁶⁶ By looking at this tomb and its surroundings we can easily assume about its original beauty and grandeur.

6.8.3 Akbari Gardens

Among Akbar's women his Rajput wife Maryam-uz-Zamani is said to have constructed a garden and *baoli* (step-well) near Bayana. Constructed at a cost of rupees two thousand the baoli still exists but the garden has disappeared.¹⁶⁷

6.8.4 Jahangiri Gardens

6.8.4.1 Gardens of Nurjahan

Among the Royal Mughal ladies Nurjahan Begum was the most prolific garden layer. Villiers Stuart has even gone to the extent of calling her "the greatest garden lover of them all"¹⁶⁸ Most of the exquisite gardens of the favorite wife of Jahangir lay in Kashmir because

¹⁶⁵ Findly 1988: 249

¹⁶⁶ Crowe & Haywood 1973:63

¹⁶⁷ Jahangir 1989: 2. 64

¹⁶⁸ Stuart 1913:126

of the natural scenic beauty of the place, soothing climate, rich foliage and ready availability of water. During the later years of his life Jahangir had become a regular visitor to the Kashmir valley for both health reasons and holidaying. On these trips he was accompanied by Nurjahan and thus began the lifelong love affair between her and Kashmir, which led to laying of many sumptuous gardens there.

Garden of Itimad-ud-Daulah's Tomb, Agra

The pocket sized memorial of Itimad-ud-Daulah is the best tribute to a father from his daughter. This garden tomb is surrounded by an inordinately beautiful garden designed in the Persian pattern. Four water channels intersect each other to divide the garden in four equal sized squares. Interestingly use of cypresses and roses lend a sublime effect to the building structure.¹⁶⁹

Nur Afshan Garden / Ram Bagh / Aram Bagh, Agra

The site of this garden originally belonged to Babur who initially did not like the place as he found it to be irregular and swampy but later cultivated it into a fine garden endowed with rich foliage and fruits.¹⁷⁰ Soon after her marriage to Jahangir in 1611 Nurjahan was gifted this site by her emperor husband. Nurjahan and Jahangir often stayed in this garden both for entertainment and relaxation. Nur Afshan is one of the oldest surviving Mughal gardens in India and therefore it is difficult to fathom the exact nature of Nurjahan's contribution to the making of this place. Anyhow the creator of many beautiful gardens in Kashmir must have positively influenced the final look of this garden with her innovative ideas regarding design and formation.

Nur Manzil Garden, Agra

Around the time Jahangir makes mention of Nur Afshan Garden in his memoirs about the same time he refers to another garden called Nur Manzil which was again laid on the site of an old Baburi garden named Zahara Bagh. However nowhere in his memoirs Jahangir attributes Nur Manzil to have belonged to his best loved Begum but the close proximity

¹⁶⁹ Findly 1993: 251

¹⁷⁰ E&D 1873:6.451-52

between the two gardens coupled with their mention at almost the same time in Jahangir's Tuzuk make us invariably conclude that Nurjahan was responsible for the renovation of both Nur Afshan and Nur Manzil¹⁷¹

Moti Bagh, Agra

Another garden at Agra which has been attributed to the genius of Nurjahan Begum is the Moti Bagh. Foreign travelers like Peter Mundy and Pelsaert¹⁷² have attributed the authorship of this garden to Nurjahan. Both of these Europeans had seen this garden during their respective visits to Agra in 1632 and heaped praise over it for the beauty of its form.

Darogha Garden / Lalla Rookh Garden, Kashmir

Situated at the side of Manasbal Lake this is a mountain garden of the Mughal period. The bagh consisted of a palace built for Nurjahan Begum. Studded with poplar trees this garden looks "like some great high-decked galleon"¹⁷³

Nur Afzan Garden, Hari Parbat, Kashmir

Akbar had built a fort on the Hari Parbat standing by the Dal Lake in Kashmir. Jahangir had fond memories of this place as he would visit it alongwith his father in early youth. During their first trip together to Kashmir in 1620 A.D. the royal couple was appalled to find the place in a dilapidated condition. So much so that Jahangir instructed Mutamid Khan to work towards reworking the former glory of the place. Within a short span of time the garden was restored to its former glory and christened as Nur Afzan perhaps because Nurjahan had a big hand in the restoration work and was to be the benefactor of this place this time onwards.

Shalimar Garden, Kashmir

Built over an ancient Hindu site the Shalimar garden is the most famous among all the Jahangiri gardens. Jahangir's love for the place finds mention in his memoirs:

¹⁷¹ Findly 1993: 250

¹⁷² Misra 1967: 36

¹⁷³ Broecke 1957: 90

“In these two to three days I frequently embarked in a boat, and was delighted to go round and look at the flowers of Phak and Shalmar...Shalmar is near the lake. It has a pleasant stream, which comes down from the hills, and flows into the Dal Lake This place is one of the sights of Kashmir.”¹⁷⁴

This garden was originally laid by Jahangir with valuable inputs from his wife Nurjahan Begum but during the subsequent reign of Shahjahan new additions were made to this place. Nurjahan’s biggest contribution however remains in the field of introducing the concept of zenana garden at Shalimar and elsewhere also. It was because of her efforts that the tight Akbari shackles over women’s freedom and free movement were somewhat loosened and women not only became a more visible part of the Mughal establishment.

Vernag Garden, Kashmir

The best loved garden of Jahangir and Nurjahan was the Kashmiri garden of Vernag. Situated between Jammu and Srinagar this garden site was an old center of worship among the Hindus. Local tradition ascribes this place to have been Jahangir’s original choice for his burial ground.¹⁷⁵ During prince hood Jahangir had visited this place with his father and had been ever since besotted by the natural beauty of the place. After his accession to the throne he ordered construction of a garden with many pavilions and palaces in it. He also had a pool built in this garden which was famous for housing fishes. Bernier records that “the celebrated Nour Mehalle” had attached gold rings to the nostrils of these fishes.¹⁷⁶ Exact nature of Nurjahan’s contribution to the development of this garden can’t be ascertained as the garden had come into being long before her marriage with Jahangir. However it can’t be denied that Nurjahan must have played major role in the later grooming and development of this garden.

Achbal Garden, Kashmir

Another loved Kashmiri garden of the celebrated Royal couple was the Garden at Achbal. Like Vernag the site for Achbal had been previously a Hindu place of worship called

¹⁷⁴ Jahangir 1989: 2.151

¹⁷⁵ Stuart 1913:185

¹⁷⁶ Bernier 1934: 414

Akshavala. This place was famous for a mammoth natural fountain that contained yellow colored fishes. An added attraction of the garden were the tasty fruits which grew in abundance here like apple, plum, cherry, apricot, pear etc.¹⁷⁷ Unfortunately most of this garden has been lost to history and very few original Mughal structures remain intact. The garden of Achbal had been renamed as Begamabad after Nurjahan, which proves beyond any doubt her influence over this place.

6.8.5 Shahjahani Gardens

6.8.5.1 Taj Mahal Garden Tomb, Agra

The most spectacular of all Mughal buildings The Taj Mahal was constructed by Shahjahan in the memory of his deceased wife Mumtaz Mahal. Constructed according to the prevalent garden tomb style this tomb of Mumtaz Mahal is surrounded by a beautiful garden. Out of all the Mughal gardens perhaps this is in the best preserved state. However this garden tomb was a dedication of love by a husband and not an original creation of a Mughal lady

Jahanara & Roshanara's Gardens

Among the progeny of Shahjahan his daughters Jahanara and Roshanara are credited to have continued with the Tartar-Mughal tradition of laying beautiful gardens. Jahanara Begum was behind the construction of many gardens in Kashmir like Bagh-i-Safa,¹⁷⁸ Bagh-i-Jahanara, , Bagh-i-Aishabad etc. Begum Sahab had many more gardens laid all over the country like in Delhi, Ambala and Surat etc. At Delhi she constructed the Begum ka Bagh.¹⁷⁹ This was a beautiful garden full of pools, water channels and all kinds of natural foliage. Jahanara's younger sister Roshanara's garden tomb at Delhi is situated in the midst of a garden.¹⁸⁰ The walls of this garden tomb are embellished with natural creepers. This garden is not very large but is of scenic beauty.

Shalimar Garden, Delhi

Among Shahjahan's wives Akbarabadi Mahal built the Shalimar garden near Badli Sarai,

¹⁷⁷ Stuart 1913: 185-86

¹⁷⁸ Lahori 1867:1.195

¹⁷⁹ Dayal 1982:29

¹⁸⁰ Crowe & Haywood 1973:184

six miles to the north-west of Shahjahanabad.¹⁸¹ According to Inayat Khan the estimated cost of this garden was two lakh rupees. This garden is an imitation of the original Shalimar Baghs at Kashmir and Agra. Like most of the gardens from the period this one is hardly existent today.

6.8.6 Aurangjebi Gardens

During the reign of Aurangzeb his talented daughter Zeb-un-Nisa took to garden laying activity. Mention need be made of two of her famous creations the Chau Burji Bagh and Nawan Kot garden.¹⁸² As far as the Chau Burji garden is concerned time has left deep scars on this place and most of it has been lost to time except few walls, gates and minarets. Zeb-un-Nisa is said to have gifted this garden to her friend and tutor Miya Bai.¹⁸³

6.9 Other Fine and Domestic Arts

Mughal age was the period of artistic and literary achievements as great progress was marked in various fields of artistic life. Fine arts like music, dance, painting, and poetry were patronized by Mughal men and women. In fact many ladies of the harem excelled in different fields of artistic activity. We will now take up the contribution of Mughal ladies in different fields of social activity.¹⁸⁴

6.9.1 Music & Dance

Various means of artistic expression like music, dance, and drama have been an intrinsic part of Indian cultural ethos since time immemorial. With the coming of the Muslims to India a synthesis between the Indian and Central Asian cultures took place, which gave the Indian culture a new tone and tenor. From its inception in 1526 till its very end the Mughal regime witnessed great progress in the field of performing arts. Among Mughal dynasts starting from Babur to Bahadur Shah Zafar in the end all were fond of music and dance except the puritan Aurangzeb who considered it against the tenets of Islam and banished

¹⁸¹ Crowe and Haywood 1973:146

¹⁸² Mukerjee 2001: 220

¹⁸³ Zebunnisa 1913:20

¹⁸⁴ Mukerjee 2001: 220

dance and music from his court. The dancing and singing girls in the mughal realm were commonly known as Kanchanis. Among Mughal monarchs Shahjahan was most favorably inclined to music and dance and Kanchanis would perform in the King's presence on all important festivals and happy occasions.¹⁸⁵

Besides maintaining a large retinue of male court musicians Mughals employed a large number of female singers and dancers also. However the performances of male musicians could only be appreciated by women from behind the screens,¹⁸⁶ Among Royal women Nurjahan,¹⁸⁷ Mumtaz Mahal and Jahanara were well versed in music and composed lyrical poems of great literary merit. Dara Shukoh's wife Nadira Begum was well trained in classical form of music and is said to have been gifted by her father-in-Law Shahjahan with Tansen's famous work on music. Even the otherwise austere Aurangzeb was attracted by a slave girl named Zainabadi who was well versed in music.

As far as the art of dancing is considered it did not find any takers among royal women for the stigma attached to it. As dancing was considered to be the preserve of low women only specific groups of women practiced this art form. Mughal ladies' appreciation and patronage would have positively affected the growth of music and dance in the empire in general and harem in particular. However, royal ladies could not themselves learn dance but they could enjoy the dance of female performers in select zenana gatherings. We have numerous paintings from the period which bring to light the interest of Mughal women in dance performances.¹⁸⁸ Music and dance were favorite pastimes of harem ladies almost till the very end of the Mughal empire.

6.9.2 Painting

The art of painting was keenly nurtured by almost all the Mughal emperors. Babur, Akbar, and Jahangir were great connoisseurs of the art of painting. However the greatest patron of this art form was Jahangir who was endowed with a discriminating eye and fine aesthetic sense. Many painters produced exquisite paintings under his watchful eyes. Influence of

¹⁸⁵ Lal 1988: 168

¹⁸⁶ Ibid:168

¹⁸⁷ Pool 1954: 91-92

¹⁸⁸ Mukerjee 2001: 222

European style can clearly be felt on the court paintings made under this period.¹⁸⁹ Nurjahan not just ruled her emperor husband's heart but his empire also. In all fairness we can say that in the field of art and culture she exerted wholesome influence upon her husband. Her Persian lineage equipped with a more or less Indian upbringing gave way to a happy synthesis between the Persian and Indian styles of decoration. This can be felt all through the Jahangiri buildings from the period.¹⁹⁰ We hear of many famous women painters from this period like Ruqaiyya Begum, Nini, Nadira Banu etc¹⁹¹. It is a known fact that no male painter was allowed to set eyes upon the harem women. Hence the duty to paint the harem scenes rested with these female artistes who excelled in their field.

Among Royal Mughal ladies Nurjahan is said to have possessed good understanding for the art of painting. We even have a painting of hers in which she is seen observing a painting of Hasan Ghulam.¹⁹² Jahangir's biographer Beni Prasad informs us about Nurjahan's painting skills¹⁹³ so does K.S.Lal. The inclusion of women as the chief subject matter in paintings of Jahangiri period is chiefly attributed to the influence of Nurjahan upon her husband. Another important contribution of Nurjahan was towards the change in contemporary themes as there is a marked difference in the paintings of Akbari and Jahangiri periods. The Rajput influence became too prominent in the paintings of Jahangir's time. It is quite interesting to note that while in the paintings of Akbar's time *good* and noble women are always veiled the *bad* ones are shown meeting tragic end like being eaten alive by wild animals or being drowned in the sea water.¹⁹⁴ On the contrary women of Jahangiri paintings are seen boldly flaunting their plunging necklines and bare midriffs. This change in picturisation of women is an unmistakable Nurjahani influence on these paintings. All-in-all women are depicted as being more comfortable with their bodies. In their new *avatar* they seem to have transformed from pleasure givers to pleasure seekers. Talking about the direct contribution of Mughal ladies in the field of painting it is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of their contribution to this field. However their admiration

¹⁸⁹ Findly 1993: 218

¹⁹⁰ Ibid:219

¹⁹¹ Das 1982: 44

¹⁹² Mukerjee 2001: 225

¹⁹³ Prasad 1922:172

¹⁹⁴ Findly 1993: 226

for this art form is visible from some paintings of this time where women are seen painting or appreciating other artist's works.

6.9.3 Cooking

Mughals were voracious eaters and fine connoisseurs of food. In the royal kitchen a great variety of dishes were prepared by the expert cooks. The royal table was always laced with the most sumptuous variety of food stuffs. We do not find any ready reference of the Royal queens or princesses sweating it out in the kitchen but we need not stress our imagination too hard to think that Mughal women would have had sometimes tried their culinary skills.¹⁹⁵ Among the Royal ladies Nurjahan is known for her culinary talents so is Shahjahan's daughter Jahanara who is said to have prepared tasteful dishes for Sufi saint Miyan Mir.¹⁹⁶ However numerous such instances are not recorded in history. As far as Nurjahan Begum's contribution to this field is concerned many fine dishes that form a part of the rich Mughlai cuisine today are said to have been invented by the talented Nurjahan. Jahangir was a lover of food and his weakness for meat is well recorded in historical tradition¹⁹⁷ Nurjahan's interest in cooking can partly be attributed to the sensibilities of her gourmet husband. In fact an intricately carved jade knife preserved in the Salar Jung Museum at Hyderabad is said to have belonged to Nurjahan which might have been used by her for fruit-cutting.

6.9.4 Dress & Ornamentation

The Mughal court as well as household was a seat of splendor and sumptuous grandeur. This is testified by not just the Indian writers but the foreign travelers also who visited India in those times. Courtly celebrations and organizing of feasts was central to the day to day working of the court. Royal ladies used their creative energies to decorate and embellish the court as well as harem establishment in the most unique ways. Humayun's wife Maham Begum is said to have been skilled in the art of organizing feasts and saw to the decorations on such occasion. Gulbadan Begum's *Ahval* tells us that once Maham

¹⁹⁵ Mukerjee 2001: 224

¹⁹⁶ Misra 1967: 93

¹⁹⁷ Findly 1993: 221

Begum had ordered the illumination of not just the streets and bazaar but also the residences of common soldiers and nobles. This practice became a permanent feature of Mughal decorative style later. Gulbadan's Humayunama is filled with numerous such instances when the Mughal ladies supervised and indulged in the decoration of harem premises and the associated paraphernalia.¹⁹⁸

Nurjahan-“*The light of the world*” is known in history as an extremely beautiful woman. Her Persian lineage had gifted her with superb loveliness, vivacity, and charm. She is known to be a fashionable woman as well. Nurjahan devised new varieties of clothes and cosmetics. The introduction of stitched clothes is the biggest contribution of Jahangiri period in the field of women's clothing¹⁹⁹. The role of Nurjahan in the invention of contemporary fashionable garments like *payjamas* (trouser) and *Jaguli* (gown with tight full sleeves and opening at neckline) is understandable. For we know that she had come up with new kind of clothes and decorative patterns like *badla*, *dudami*, *kinari*, *panchtoliya* etc. Another Nurjahani creation was the *Nurmahali*, a kind of low-priced wedding dress, which became very popular among the general public. The last wife of Jahangir was bestowed with a keen sense of aesthetics. She not only devised new styles of fashion and dress but also came up with new ways of organizing feasts and decorating the imperial court and household.²⁰⁰ Nurjahan is credited with the invention of *Farsh-i-chandni*, a carpet which had become extremely popular throughout the country.²⁰¹ The influence of Nurjahan over the contemporary fashion and style is substantiated by Khafi Khan who writing on the topic almost a hundred years later said, “the fashions introduced by Nurjahan still governed the society, and the old ones survived only among the Afghans in backward towns.”²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Mukerjee 2001: 222

¹⁹⁹ Mukerjee 2001:222

²⁰⁰ Findly 1993: 221

²⁰¹ Pant 1978: 118

²⁰² Khan 1869: 1.269

6.10 Economic Activities of Harem Women

The Mughal age was marked by overall prosperity and growth in all the spheres of life. There was hectic economic activity in the country, which led to growth of trade and commerce. Indian commodities like textiles, spices, and exotic products like opium and dyes were in great demand in the countries of west Asia and North Africa. The items of import were gold, silver, ivory, pearls, precious gems, horses etc.²⁰³ Mughal women made a fairly large but little appreciated contribution to the development of trade and commerce in the country. However it needs to be mentioned that not many Royal ladies found interest in business activities. Jahangir's Rajput mother Mariyam-uz-Zamani, Nurjahan, Shahjahan's daughter Jahanara are a few notable names who were keenly involved in business enterprise. Besides participating in economic activities these ladies saw to the construction of markets and caravan sarais thus encouraging and facilitating trade conditions in the country.

6.10.1 Economic Condition of Royal Ladies

We already know that the Mughal ladies were paid through jagirs allotted to them whose revenues were entirely at their disposal. Other sources of their income were the various presents given to them by their royal master as well as other members of the Royal family from time to time. Few of them had other sources of income, which made them extremely rich. For we know that Nurjahan and Jahanara were one of the richest women of their times. Their personal income made them economically self-sufficient. Thus we see that the Mughals gave their women sufficient degree of economic freedom. Even while confined within the four walls of zenana the women were allowed to maintain their jagirs, indulge in trade activities through their trusted officers. Even in those times these ladies actively participated in sea-trade by owning ships.²⁰⁴ Thus these ladies worked towards the development of trade and commerce in an indirect manner. In the preceding pages we have seen that the Mughal ladies wore the costliest clothes, gems, and jewelry, which not only boosted the demand of in-house manufacturing units called *karkhanas* but also gave

²⁰³ Pant 1930: 106-07

²⁰⁴ Sarkar 1987: 193

impetus to increased internal and external import.

We already know about the rare finesse and high quality of products preferred by the harem ladies for their day-to-day use. For instance their dresses were made with the finest variety of silks procured from Bengal and Bihar and outsourced from countries like China and Iran. While Muslin (*Malmal*) came from Dhaka. Thus demand for exquisite luxury items like textiles, jewelry, furniture, pottery, carpets etc. infused internal as well as external trade.²⁰⁵ These units or Karkhanas served dual purposes of providing employment to trained and talented people and giving impetus to the manufacturing sector. The artisans prepared choicest items in these local manufacturing units for the ready consumption of the harem dwellers. Building of sarais or rest houses for travelers was also actively undertaken by the members of the imperial family both male and female. However, their chief aim in constructing these buildings was mostly charitable. As these rest houses were meant to provide food and shelter to the wearied traveler. Nevertheless royal ladies' role in the enhancement of trade and commerce was substantial though small.

6.10.2 The First Steps into Business Activity

The first such instance is of Humayun's widow Haji Begam constructing the Arban Sarai near Delhi. Incidentally this was the same lady who constructed Humayun's tomb. Built in 1560 A.D., the chief purpose of this sarai was to provide safe resting place to the casual travelers as well as professional traders. However such provisions indirectly helped trade as now merchants could move freely with their goods from one place to other. However one fact that can't be ignored is that the Mughal women remained late entrants into the field of commerce. Akbar's Rajput wife Maryam -uz- Zamani was the first Mughal lady to have forayed into this territory. This lady owned her own ships, which carried on trade between port city of Surat and ports in Red Sea. We hear of a famous ship of hers called Rahimi.²⁰⁶

Mention of trade practices of this Mughal lady is made in foreign traveler accounts also. William Finch noted, "The Emperor's mother, or others acting under her protection, carried

²⁰⁵ Mukerjee 2001: 237

²⁰⁶ Sarkar1975: 274

on extensive trading operations, and at this time a vessel belonging to her was being laden for a voyage to Mocha.”²⁰⁷ In fact interests of contemporary foreign trading powers like English and Portuguese often conflicted with the trade practices of the Queen mother. Once the Portuguese irked the Mughals by capturing one of Mariyam-uz-Zamani’s ships which resulted in the seizure of Portuguese town of Daman by the Mughals besides closing down of Jesuit Church at Agra.²⁰⁸ Referring to this incident Withington wrote:

The shippe, which arrived at the barre of Surat on the 13th of September, 1613..was taken by the Portugales armado of friggotts, notwithstandinge their passe which they had of the Portugales. This shoppe was very richlye laden, beeinge worth a hundred thowsand pounce; yet not contented with the shippe and goods, but tooke allsoe 700 persons of all sorts with them to Goa²⁰⁹

This incident in particular soured the already strained relations between the Mughals and the Portuguese and proved to be a blessing in disguise for the English. In fact the Portuguese didn’t stop at capturing the imperial ships alone they went on to burn 120 ships which included the Queen mother’s Rahimi. Though the Portuguese tried to make amends by paying three lakh rupees as compensation for ships captured by them but their strained relations with Munhall could never become normal again. Before we move further it is pertinent to note that the *Cartaz* or pass system was a big deterrent in the way of cordial Mughal-Portuguese relations. Under this system it was mandatory to obtain passes to travel in Portuguese water. What was more outrageous to the Muslims were the pictures of Jesus and his mother Virgin Mary on these passes. Traveling for pilgrimage to Mecca on these passes was considered equivalent to idolatry by the orthodox Muslims. Anyhow the relationship between Portuguese and Mughals continued unabated during the more tolerant reigns of Akbar and Jahangir. Primarily because of their providing much sought after Christian pictures to the Mughal sovereigns But the Portuguese excesses made them gradually loose the Mughal concessions.²¹⁰

²⁰⁷ Foster 1921: 123

²⁰⁸ Foster 1921: 191

²⁰⁹ Ibid:203

²¹⁰ Findly 1988: 227-38

Another Hindu lady to have been credited with some sort of economic activity was Jahangir's wife and Shahjahan's mother named Jagat Gosain. This Jodhpur princess made indirect contribution to the promotion of trade practices by founding a village named Sohagpura wholly dedicated to the manufacturing of glass Bengals.²¹¹

6.10.2.1 Nurjahan's Trading Activities

The first woman entrepreneur among Mughal ladies was without doubt the celebrated Nurjahan Begam and like all other fields of artistic activity, in the field of economics also she remains almost unrivalled except by her granddaughter Jahanara Begam. This last wife of Jahangir was the fountain head of administrative activity in the country for almost fifteen years and amassed huge wealth due to her close proximity with the Emperor. Her influence over Jahangir was such that coins were struck in her name. In fact she remains the only woman in the entire history of Mughals to have achieved this privilege.²¹²

As per the usual custom Jahangir had allotted many jagirs to her for Nurjahan's maintenance. The revenues of these lands filled her purse and made her extremely rich. In addition to these jagirs she was given costly presents by her doting husband from time to time. Many officials both foreign and Indian used to give her presents in order to gain Emperor's favor. The wealth thus generated was spent by Nurjahan Begum in doing charity, philanthropy, building monuments and carrying out works of public utility and last but not the least in trade activity. Like Haji Begum Nurjahan also constructed sarais or rest houses. The most famous of them was the Nur Mahal Sarai near Jalandhar (Punjab). Built at a place of strategic importance for the Mughals this sarai was known for its architectural merit as well.²¹³ The true purpose of such buildings was to provide food and shelter to travelers ranging from common people to merchants and soldiers. We are told that Jahangir was very much interested in such kind of building activities. So wrote he in his memoirs:

I now ordered that from Agra to Lahore they should put up a pillar at every *kos*, and every three *kos* make a well, so that wayfarers might travel in ease and contentment, and not

²¹¹ Kausar and Kabir 1982: 151

²¹² Pelsaert 1925: 29

²¹³ Shujauddins 1967: 102

endure hardships from thirst or heat of the sun.²¹⁴

We hear of another sarai having been built under the supervision of Queen Nurjahan at Agra. Peter Mundy is said to have stayed at this place during his Agra sojourn in 1632.²¹⁵ Nurjahan did not restrict herself to building activities alone but ventured in the field of trade both external as well as internal. She owned ships, which ferried between port city of Surat and Arabian Sea. As Surat happened to be one of the most important ports in India from where trade was carried with ports on the Red Sea.²¹⁶ Nurjahan was intelligent enough to side with the English owing to the difficult relations between the Mughals and the Portuguese. Anyhow the English had become the most prominent foreign trading power in India during the heydays of Nurjahan. Thomas Roe, the English ambassador to the court of Jahangir happens to be the only foreign traveler to have given detailed accounts of Nurjahan and her junta which were at the helm of affairs during his stay in India. We are told that during their very first meeting in 1616 the Englishman impressed Emperor Jahangir great deal so much so that the Mughal sovereign offered him the services of his Royal physician. It was during this time that he came to know about the power and influence of Nurjahan and her junta.²¹⁷

Among foreign travelers from that period Pelsaert is the only one to make mention of Nurjahan's internal trade activities. He tells us that her officers were stationed at Sikandra and collected duty imposed upon goods before they crossed the river Yamuna to enter the main city markets. Since all the important routes passed through Agra it had become the chief center of trading activities in those days. The goods came here from the eastern parts of the country like Bengal and Bihar. The chief items of import were cotton and silk textiles, ginger, fennel, grain, butter etc.²¹⁸ The various letters written by Thomas Roe and his Chaplain Terry inform us about the power of Nurjahan and her clique in the matters of general administration as well as all other matters of state. However neither of them ever saw the empress owing to purdah, she interacted with them through her trusted officials.

²¹⁴ Jahangir 1989: 2.100

²¹⁵ Mundy 1914:2,78-79

²¹⁶ Foster 1921: 62

²¹⁷ Foster 1899:1.118

²¹⁸ Pelsaert 1925: 4-5

Begum Sahab's Trading Activities

Shahjahan's daughter Jahanara followed in the foot-steps of her grandmother by actively participating in trading activity. Much like her step grandmother, Jahanara Begum took keen interest in all the related aspects of trade activity. She built sarais and markets, owned ships, and traded with foreign powers. The vast pool of resources was generated by the customary presents that she received from her father and other members of the imperial family and then the revenues of her jagirs were there to fill her coffers. It becomes important to mention here that like Nurjahan in the time of Jahangir, Jahanara was a force to reckon with during the climax of her father Shahjahn's reign. As a measure to win over the favor of the sovereign lavish gifts were given to her by various sources from time to time. We have many instances of influential people both foreign and Indian obliging her with gifts to win her favors. So writes Bernier, "This princess had accumulated great riches by means of her large allowances and of the costly presents which flowed in from all quarters, in consideration of numberless negotiations entrusted to her sole management."²¹⁹ Among foreign powers Dutch and English often gave costly presents to please her. French traveler Tavernier is also said to have given rich gifts to Begum Sahab.²²⁰

The sarai of Begum Sahab was constructed at her instance. Meant for the use of merchants both foreign and Indian, this sarai had adequate provisions of safety and security. Destroyed during the revolt of 1857 this was an important constructional contribution of Jahanara Begum in the field of trade and commerce.²²¹ She owned ships which carried on trade with distant lands. The name of her largest and best known ship was *Sahebi*. This ship was used for both trading as well ferrying pilgrims for Haj to Mecca.²²² We come to know of a ship named *Gunjawar* originally belonging to the Mughal emperor Shahjahan which was given by him as a gift to Jahanara Begum. This ship was also instrumental in carrying trade activity from Surat.

Princess Jahanara's name is associated with the construction of two famous markets also.

²¹⁹ Bernier 1934: 12

²²⁰ Tavernier 1925:1.141

²²¹ Valle 1891:1.44

²²² Moosvi 1990:309,313

These were the Chowk Sarai Bazaar at Lahore²²³ and Chandni Chowk at Delhi. The original Chandni Chowk had a pool in its centre. The water of this pool gave the dazzling effect in moon light, which gave it its name.²²⁴ This market of Chandni Chawk was an important centre of trade during Mughal period. Merchants from far flung areas in the empire as well as foreign traders engaged in trade here. Shops in this market sold commodities ranging from gems and jewelry to fruits, animals, liquor etc. Interestingly Chandni Chawk remains to be the centre of trading activity in old city of Delhi even today.

Keeping with the tradition of Nurjahan and Jahanara Aurangzeb's daughter Zinat-un-Nisa also engaged in building sarais which were used by general travelers as well merchants. We have an instance of Aurangzeb's wife named Nawab Bai constructing a caravanserai at Fardapur.²²⁵ Except these two ladies we do not have any historical records telling us about any kind of economic contribution made by any other royal lady from the Mughal period. Thus we come to know that women did contribute to the field of commerce and trade but not in overwhelming numbers. Maryam-uz-Zamani, Nurjahan and Jahanara are the only three names to have made significant contribution in the field of economic activity. From constructing sarais and market places to owning ships and engaging in external as well as internal trade. The most remarkable feature of this entire enterprise was that the *pardanasheen* women managed the intricacies of business from behind the veil as they neither came out in public nor interacted directly with their rivals and partners. Anyhow it was no less creditable to have done business with the restrictions imposed upon women's free movement and limited exposure available to them in those times.

²²³ Kambu 1923:3.47

²²⁴ Dayal 1982: 15

²²⁵ Sarkar 1912:1.63

CHAPTER 7

COMPARISON OF MUGHAL HAREM WITH RAJPUT ZENANA DYODHI

Rajput Zenana Dyodhi / Raniwas: An Introduction

The main purpose behind the evolution of the Zenana Dyodhi as an institution was the concern for the security of the royal ladies. In India the concept of Pardah evolved during the medieval period. However, Kautilya has mentioned that some kind of purdah was prevalent among the rich and affluent classes even during the ancient period. Nevertheless, the kind of rigidity which came to be associated with it during the medieval age was primarily owing to Muslim influence. Interestingly Purdah was not prevalent in the south of India. However it became a permanent aspect of north Indian women's life specially that of the Rajputs. Seclusion of women to separate quarters meant especially for their residence evolved as a part of Pardah. Both the Hindus and Muslims rigidly followed it.¹

Both the Mughal harem and Rajput zenana were similar in their central idea-seclusion of women and observance of Purdah or veil. As far as the rituals, customs, and other practices are concerned there were many similar features between the two. However, the Mughal harem had a more pronounced Persian influence while the Rajput zenana dyodhi retained its basic Hindu character. However inclusion of Rajput women² in the Mughal harem and matrimonial ties between House of Mughals and various Rajput ruling families decidedly impacted the nature and character of both these institutions. Though no Mughal Princess is heard to have ever entered the Rajput zenana yet it can't be denied that the Zenana remained untouched by the Mughal or Muslim influence given close proximity between the two. As various Rajput generals were in the service of the Mughals it is hard to imagine that they could have escaped from the imperial influence.

Hence we will take up a detailed study of the Rajput Zenana Dyodhi and try to understand

¹ Saxena 1981:256

² Nath 1994: 46

the finer aspects of the workings of this peculiar Rajput establishment both independently and vis-à-vis its Mughal counterpart the harem. The concept, working and even construction of Zenana Dyodhis was almost similar throughout the Rajputana among all the contemporary Rajput ruling houses - Amber (Jaipur), Mewar, Marwar, Jaisalmer, Kota, Bundi, Bikaner etc.³ Since matrimonial alliances were forged between the various Rajput clans we find an underlying affinity between the socio-cultural practices and beliefs prevalent in all the contemporary dyodhis.

7.1 Jaipur Raniwas

The Kachwahas were the first Rajput clan to enter into matrimonial alliance with the Mughals.⁴ Besides giving the Mughals their fourth ruler the house of Amber gave them a great military general like Raja Mansingh who faithfully served two generations of Mughals. Generation after generation of Kachwahas served their Mughal masters faithfully. Hence it is but expedient to make specific mention of the Amber or Jaipur zenana dyodhi. There was the provision of a separate *zenana darbar* or Ladies' court for the Zenana Dyodhi just like the *Mardana Darbar* or the Royal court. Dance, music and all kinds of entertainment formed an integral part of the zenana life. The practice of *pardah* was strictly observed, only the King had access to this place even princess were removed from there as soon as they gained maturity.⁵ The Dyodhis were independent institutions in themselves. As every King had many wives it was expedient to make arrangements for their comfort and safety and hence evolved the institution of *Raniwas* or Zenana Dyodhi in the Hindu Rajput principalities. All the various female relations of the *Raja* had their separate dwellings ranging from mahals, *rawalas* to separate rooms for them depending upon the stature of the Lady.

³ Shekhawat 2013: 249

⁴ Mukerjee 2001:127

⁵ Parik 91-93

7.2 Constitution of Rajput Raniwas

7.2.1 Inmates of Zenana Dyodhi

The Zenana Dyodhi was an independent and separate institution like the harem of Mughals. It was run in a systematic and well-planned out way. It was no easy job to maintain women of varying age groups and diverse backgrounds happy and contented under one roof. Arrangements were so painstakingly made that through a system of mutual checks and balance the conflicting opinions and divergent minds could be kept at peace. However tensions, jealousies and conspiracy formed an essential part of this vast establishment which even had the potential of sometimes disrupting the peace and stability of the empire itself. So let's look inside the inner world of zenana dyodhi to understand its complex nature and working. There were many mahals, rawalas and rooms in which the ladies of royal household lived.⁶ In the following pages we will take up a detailed study of the occupants of these Royal apartments.

7.2.1.1 Rajmata

Mother of the reigning Maharaja was called *Rajmata* or *Maaji Sahiba*. The Rajputs have always held their mothers in very high esteem. Like any other normal household the grand old lady had hold over the entire zenana. It was customary for the Queens to touch the feet of their mother-in- Law as a mark of respect, this practice was called *page lagani*.⁷ The kings would often visit their mothers and enquire about their well-being. All the important festivals, marriages, religious ceremonies, and family functions were celebrated under the queen mother's guidance. The allowances and money allotted to various women of zenana was keenly inspected by the Rajmata. There are many such examples in the Rajput history where the Royal mothers have acted as regents to their minor sons and thus wielded political and economic power.⁸ All-in-all the authority and influence of Rajmatas was immense and they had a benevolent but controlling role in the zenana dyodhi. In reverence for their mothers both Mughals and Rajputs were alike and gave great respect to them.

⁶ Shekhawat 2014:51

⁷ Sharma 2000: 32

⁸ Arora 1981: 82-83

The ladies of the zenana were not meager showpieces or means of entertainment for their master. They were strong-willed and talented ladies who took charge of most difficult situations with daunting courage. Their responsibility increased manifold when grim situations occurred like King's untimely death or invasion by enemy. There are numerous such instances where these brave Rajputnis acted as regent to their minor sons and took care of not just the administration but also handled delicate matters like war and peace successfully.⁹ We have the famous instance of Man Singh's son Bhaav Singh succeeding to the throne of Amer after the former's death. Bhaav Singh being childless was succeeded by Maha Singh's son Jai Singh. Raised under the able guardianship of his mother *Rajmata Damayanti* Jai Singh went on to become an able ruler. So much so that he was given the title of 'Mirza Raja' by Aurangzeb for the services done to the Mughal empire.¹⁰

Patrani

Rajputs were masters of polygamous household with every King having numerous wives. However the coveted status of Patrani or chief queen was given to only one lady.¹¹ She was the most important and powerful woman in the zenana. All the other ladies stood subordinated to her and she formed an important part of state. Either the King ordained this position out of his love or preference for any particular wife of his or it was automatically devolved upon a *Rani* out of popular custom. The event of a queen's elevation as the Patrani was marked by a lavish festival called -*Ranipade ka Dastur*.¹² The king and all his queens accompanied by all the officers and workers of zenana, nobles, poets, priests and all important people of state participated. It is recorded in history that the Ranis holding the designation of Ranipade were given many kinds of privileges and facilities. The presence of patrani was mandatory during all religious and socio- cultural ceremonies.¹³ All the king's women vied for this coveted status as it gained them unquestioned supremacy over and above all other zenana inmates. Thus we see that patrani held a very prominent place among all the royal houses of Rajputana.

⁹ Shekhawat 1974: 170

¹⁰ Singh 2010:144

¹¹ Shekhawat 2014: 52

¹² Rathor 1994: 26

¹³ Arora 1981:76-77

The prevalence of Polygamy had raised the number of king's women manifold. It was not easy to keep all these women happy at the same time. However, all the necessary precautions were taken to keep the Royal mistresses happy and contented it was not humanly possible and hence cropped tensions and trouble in the zenana dyodhi from time to time. Anyhow as part of his endeavor to keep all his wives happy, the King maintained a fixed schedule of visiting all his ladies.¹⁴ Every night after taking his dinner the Lord would retire to the chamber of the chosen wife but before that a *beeda* of paan or beetle leaf was sent to the respective Rani, in case the said lady returned it, it was taken as a sign of refusal. Here a marked difference is noticeable in the status of Mughal and Rajput ladies. While it was impossible for a Royal Mughal lady to refuse her Lord's wish we see a fairly reasonable amount of freedom that was available to the Rajput ladies vis-à-vis their Mughal sisters in this regard.

Another important fact that needs to be noted here is that instead of adopting their husband's surname the Rajput ladies continued to attach the surname of their father's family. For example a princess or *kunwari* born in Shekhawat clan will continue to be called Shekhawatji even after her marriage in any other *gotra*. There is a long list of such ladies who were known by their father's gotra instead of their husband's family name- *Jhaliji*, *Bhatyaniji*, *Sanchoriji*, *Shekhawatji*, *Gaurji*, *Devriji* etc.¹⁵ There is a marked difference between the Mughal and Rajput policy in this regard. For we do not have any such instance where Mughal women were given the permission to retain their family names. In fact their very names are lost in history. All we know of them is through the titles that were given to them. Even the Rajput princesses married into Mughal household are known by their titles instead of their names like Amber princess Harkha Bai who was called Mariyam-uz-Zamani while her niece Man Bai became famous as Shah Begum.

Pardayat/ Paswan/ Khawas

Like the *Kanchanis* and *Parastars* of Mughal harem *Paradayats/ Paswans* or concubines formed an inherent part of Rajput raniwas also¹⁶. Maharaja Jagat Singh's love for his

¹⁴ Shekhawat 1974: 176

¹⁵ Chudawat and Swarnakar 2002: 51

¹⁶ Pareek 94

concubine named Ras Kapur bordered on obsession.. Famously called “*Adhe Amer Ki Rani.*” Jagat Singh had even bestowed upon this pardayat half of the world famous library of his father Sawai Jai Singh.¹⁷ Similar are the cases of Gulabrai, a paswan of Maharaja Vijay Singh of Jodhpur and Nanhijan, Jaswant Singh II’s paswan who held tremendous power over their respective paramours. If and when a dancing girl or *Bai* caught the King’s attention out of her beauty or talent she was promoted to the status of Pardayat or Paswan. These women were granted *jagir* worth rupees five thousand a year and in case of giving birth to a male child or *Lalji* they were given an additional grant of five thousand rupees.

The real difference in the status of a Queen and concubine could be adjudged through their surnames. While the Ranis retained the names of their father’s family. For example *Rathorji, Jhaliji, Jadunji, Tanwarji* etc. the pardayats were known by the name of the Dyodhis they were respectively attached to with *Rayji* or *Sukh* added as a suffix to their names like: Hira Rayji, Vishakha Rayji, Bharat Rayji, Nainsukh etc. As per the usual custom the king would never marry these paswans and if he did out of affection or any other reason than they were certainly not raised to the status of the chief queen.¹⁸ Many of these paswans went on to acquire powerful status during the reign of their enamored masters. They lead a life of luxury and comfort. Besides having their personal staff of attendants and maid servants these ladies maintained their own astrologers. We have instances of some temples constructed at the expense of these women. Their children were called as *Paswaniye* or *bhaba*.¹⁹ These children were raised at the expense of state. Not only were they raised by foster mothers or *Dhay Maa* like their other siblings born from Queens but their birthdays were also celebrated lavishly.

Pardayats commanded great respect in the dyodhi, being respectfully called *paswanji* even the Royal children called them *Mithi Maa* or *Mithi Saa* and led a life of ease and comfort. However they could never gain a status equal to that of the Ranis. There always remained a marked difference between them and the lawfully wedded wives of Rajas and Maharajas. All the money and wealth that these concubines accumulated during their lifetime went to the Royal treasury after their death. Their children could not inherit their property but were

¹⁷ Todd 1920: 2.298

¹⁸ Sharma 2000: 35-36

¹⁹ Shekhawat 2014: 62

given separate *jagirs* and money as means of sustenance. If Pardayats died in the Rawala their dead bodies were taken out through a separate passage and their last rites were performed in a cremation ground meant specially for them called as *Kaga Shamshan*.²⁰

7.2.2 Other women of Rajput Raniwas

7.2.2.1 Dhay Maa (Foster mother)

The concept of foster mother was a common practice between the Mughals and the Rajputs. The royal children were lovingly tendered by these women who even suckled the babies. Thus a special bond was formed between these women and the Royal children. The children born from these ladies were called foster brothers and sisters of the Emperor. *Dhay maa* was held in great esteem and special privileges were bestowed upon them. The foster mother of heir apparent or *Patwi Kunwar* was all the more privileged. These ladies were provisioned according to their status from the Royal storehouse.²¹

Besides these ladies there lived many other women inside the Zenana Dyodhi like *Dharariya, Nevgan, Sevkani, Olganiyan, Mehri, Rawataniyan, Patariyan* etc. while few of them served sexual purpose most others were employed to do household chores and provide other services. Thus we see that a host of women formed a part of the zenana establishment. Specific works were entrusted to these women who ably performed their duties. Only the Ranis, Maharanis and Pardayats were attached to the King's bed. Sometimes maid servants too had a sexual purpose. Otherwise all the women of zenana observed strict *pardah* and their chastity was beyond doubt. Thus it becomes pertinent to note that like the Mughal harem zenana dyodhi was also a fully independent and high functioning body of the state. Strict rules of decorum and immaculate code of conduct formed part of the zenana life.²²

Unlike the popular sentiment the life inside zenana was of hectic activity. Like any other household occasions of birth, marriage, birthdays, festivals etc were celebrated with

²⁰ Nagar 2001: 393

²¹ Shekhawat 2014: 60

²² Sharma 1999: 78

traditional fanfare.²³ Of course the women of zenana lived lives shrouded in ease and abundant luxury but they had their own set of problems. To maintain their position in the polygamous household was no easy job, the regular influx of comparatively younger and beautiful women to the zenana owing to various marriages of Rajput Kings added further to their woes. The element of uncertainty was central to the zenana establishment. Those were the days of incessant warfare and military activity, for the brave Rajput the value of human life was little compared to prestige and good name. Their motto was *vijay ya virgati* i.e. victory or martyrdom. Under these circumstances there always loomed the danger of widowhood and subsequent enemy invasion.

Pride and honor was so important to the Rajput women that they would prefer ending their lives by jumping alive in fire cauldrons (*jauhar*)²⁴ instead of suffering defilement of their honor at the hands of the enemy. *Sati* or self-immolation of widows on the funeral pyre with their deceased husbands was regularly practiced by Rajput women. On these two points there was decided difference between the Mughal harem and Rajput zenana dyodhi. For the Mughals did not repose the kind of value that Rajputs did in the chastity of their women. The practices like Jauhar and Sati were restricted to Hindu Rajputs only. However Akbar owing to his Rajput relations and Hindu leanings began the practice of total seclusion of women and observance of strict purdah.

7.3 Layout of *Rawala* and General Rules of Behavior

In Rajputana Female Residential establishment was variously called Raniwas, Janana Dyodhi or Rawala. The Zenana Mahals were so designed that no one could look inside. In fact the main gate of dyodhi was so formed that it became 'invisible' from outside owing to its slightly tilted formation hence the name *dyodhi*. There were many mahals, rawalas and rooms for the residence of all the inmates of the zenana dyodhi. All of these rooms were joined together by a gallery. Ranis, concubines, maid-servants, and attendants etc. were provided for residential quarters as per their status in the zenana. There were big courtyards in the center of these mahals. Many important ceremonies related to child-birth

²³ Shekhawat 2014: 34-35

²⁴ Bhattacharya 1998:77

and other celebrations were accomplished here. The proceedings of Mardana Darbar could be seen by the Royal ladies through glass windows and carved stone screens.²⁵

Just as the Mardana Darbar a zenana darbar was also held which was presided over by the Queen mother. Being a polygamous household the Rajput royals had many wives²⁶ but the Patrani or the chief queen was the most powerful and influential then other co-wives.²⁷ In the hierarchical order the Rajmata held the topmost position followed by the Patarani and Ranis in decreasing order. For their personal income all the queens were allotted Jagirs and their own trusted officers would take care of the management of these Jagirs. Although no direct contact was ever established between the zenana women and officers with all the conversation taking place with the help of female attendants and maid servants.²⁸ Each department of zenana dyodhi was headed by a lady darogah. Decorum and courtesy formed essential part of zenana life. Strict protocol or set of rules were followed in all aspects of behavior and mannerism within the Royal establishment.

There were secret passages and chambers connecting the King's apartments to those of his queens. This was because of two reasons first to go to his wife passing through one's mother, grandmother and the other senior ladies of the zenana was considered against decency and second to keep the secret nature of these visits intact which would not have been possible otherwise. Hence the King never went to visit his ladies through the zenana dyodhi.²⁹ Like in the Mughal harem these secret passages were locked and whenever the Maharaja wanted to go somewhere they were opened. Purdah was maintained even inside the zenana enclosure. The Royal children lived with their mothers in the zenana where they were affectionately tended by *Dhay maa* or foster mothers. After a certain age both princes and princesses were shifted to separate quarters called *Kunwarde Mahals* and *Bayan Mahals* respectively.³⁰

We notice that the strict observance of Purdah was a common feature between both the

²⁵ Chudawat and Swarnakar 2002: 7

²⁶ nand kishor parik, rajdarbar aur raniwas, p.92-93

²⁷ Sharma 1999: 78

²⁸ Sharma 2000: 15

²⁹ Ibid: 32-33

³⁰ Bhati 1962: 1.564

Rajput Zenana Dyodhi and the Mughal Harem. Due to the practice of purdah, on falling ill the women were not treated directly by royal doctors and physicians but based on the information provided by the attendants they would make their diagnosis.³¹ It was not that the ladies of zenana dyodhi were entirely cut-off from the outside world, there were different means of recreation available to them inside the closed quarters of zenana dyodhi. Besides they would often go out and their relatives would also come to visit them. But these meetings could not take place in the zenana itself.³² Hence relatives could visit the concerned Rani in her apartment provided with separate entrance but not the zenana dyodhi where other women also resided.

7.3.1 Security

Many circles of security existed to ensure the safety of the zenana inmates. While women guards were stationed inside the dyodhi, right outside the building another line of women guards stood to safeguard the Rajput seraglio. At some distance from these women stood loyal Rajput soldiers followed by another round of battalion of soldiers who formed the last and final security line. In a day the security guards were changed at regular intervals to ensure their agility and alertness. The tilted formation of the main gate itself ensured the safety of the zenana dyodhi. The doors of the raniwas were closed during night time and the keys were entrusted to a trusted officer. This main door had small openings called *bari*. Every precaution was taken to make the residence of Royal ladies as safe as possible.³³ To understand about the safety arrangements of female quarters of Rajput Royal houses we will try to look a little deeper into them.

The chief officer responsible for the safety of zenana dyodhi was the *Darogha*. It was his duty to keep the inmates of the zenana safe and secure from any kind of external intrusion or attack.³⁴ Besides fulfilling all kind of their requirements within the zenana. He served as a joining link and his duty was to supervise, inspect, and coordinate the functioning of different departments within the zenana dyodhi. All the other officers were subordinate to

³¹ Chudawat and Swarnakar 2002: 54

³² Nagar 2000: 27

³³ Chudawat and Swarnakar 2002: 15

³⁴ Sharma 2000: 24

the darogha. Thus he was supposed to be a person of unquestionable integrity, courage, and steadfastness. Not just the women but the King also reposed great trust and confidence in him.³⁵

After the Darogha it was the *Dyodhidar* who held the second most influential position in the zenana mahal³⁶. Besides being in-charge of the overall safety arrangements of the Raniwas this person guarded the Royal women whenever they went out of the Raniwas. Incorporation of *Nazars* (eunuchs) in the service of zenana dyodhi was a clear Mughal influence. In most of the Rajput Royal houses there was the tradition of keeping eunuchs inside the female quarters but in few states like those of Bundi and Mewar they were not given appointments for their male form. Owing to their unrestricted entry into the quarters of raniwas eunuchs were held in very high esteem and chief among them was called '*Nazar ji*'. Besides unmarried girls only these people were allowed to enter the private chambers of the Rajput Queens. There used to be many nazars employed in the Royal service at the same time.

Dressed in male attire these nazars played a variety of roles. Their most important job was to act as news carrier. All the important information either good or bad was provided to the zenana inmates by these nazars. The news of victory or loss in war and King's death were also given by him. Among all the male officials of Raniwas only they could frequent any place without any restriction. Nazars were supposed to accompany the ladies on their visits outside the zenana. Their importance can be gauged from the fact that they formed an indispensable part of marriage processions and all other auspicious ceremonies.³⁷ They were not only close confidants of the Ranis and Maharani but the King held them in high esteem owing to their wide reach. Only intelligent people with high integrity were appointed to this post. Like the Mughals the chief purpose of their employment was to ensure the services of strong but incapacitated males who could address to any untoward situation without endangering the security of Raniwas. We have evidence of these nazars performing sati with their deceased masters. When Maharaja Ajit Singh of Jodhpur died

³⁵ Sharma 1999: 79

³⁶ Chudawat and Swarnakar 2002: 15

³⁷ Nagar 2001: 347

two of his nazars along with sixty three ladies of his mahal committed sati. Female amazon warriors were also employed in the service of the Royal Rajput zenana . These women called *Urda Beganiyan* were specially trained for the purpose of guarding the Royal quarters.³⁸ Not only inside and outside the Raniwas but these ladies remained stationed outside the Royal abode (tents) during the King's war and hunting sojourns when his ladies accompanied him. Besides these premier security officials many other people were employed for the purpose of ensuring safety of Rajput Rawalas. Any kind of deviation or carelessness was not tolerated and strictest punishment was given to those who were found guilty of any kind of lapse in the security of the zenana dyodhi. Even the wives of high ranking officers and nobles in state had to go through a long frisking procedure before meeting the zenana ladies. Thorough checking was a must for all the visitors to the Rawala..

Hence we see that the security of female quarters was of paramount importance in both the Rajput Raniwas and the Mughal harem. As both the Rajputs and Mughals attached great importance to the chastity of their womenfolk. In fact the family honor was invested in the female body. So much so that instead of loosing ones' honor at the hands of marauders and invaders the brave Rajputnis preferred to end their own lives.³⁹ Hence cropped up the practice of *Jauhar*. The famous *shakas* of Mewar form glorious chapters of Rajput history.

7.4 Workings of the Zenana Dyodhi / Raniwas

Like any other normal household the Rajput zenana dyodhi had its own rules and regulations. There were different departments called *karkhanas* to cater to the varying needs of the zenana inmates.⁴⁰ Besides providing all the articles of daily need these karkhanas produced occasion- specific things like items related to birth, marriage, festivals, and death. These karkhanas or *kothars* also served as store-houses where all the material was always kept ready for any kind of immediate need. A detailed study of these *kothars* gives us an insight into the workings of the Rajput zenana .⁴¹

³⁸ Bhati 2007: 8

³⁹ Bhattacharya 1998: 67

⁴⁰ Sharma 2000: 16,17

⁴¹ Sharma 1999: 211

7.4.1 Kothar for clothes (Clothes Department)

The cloth related needs of the Royal family including their servants and staff were fulfilled by this department. The dress material procured for making dresses was bought and kept in this department. Headed by the Darogha of cloth house, this department gives us a peek into the prevalent customs and beliefs among the Rajput Royalty.⁴²

7.4.1.1 Vaga Kothar (Stitching Department)

The stitching of clothes as per the latest fashion and desire of the Queens took place in this department. The dress material was provided by the clothes' kothar and given to this department as per the needs and requirements of various ladies of zenana dyodhi. Here the artists created finest variety of clothes and dresses.

Taterkhana or Abdarkhana (Scent Department)

Rajput Royalty was very fond of all kinds of scents and perfumes. The very constitution of a separate department for this purpose specifies the kind of importance that was attached to perfumery by the Rajputs. This department provided all kinds of scents and related items as per the specific needs of the King and his Queens. Different kinds of fragrances were used. The technique was so advanced that we have evidence of scents even being prepared from sand.

Gaukhana (Cow Department)

Cows are revered in Hindu religion. The Rajputs on their part venerated them; all the Ranis owned their personal cows that were kept in separate enclosures. The needs of milk and milk products like curd, cheese etc were fulfilled by this department. Another interesting facet worth recording about this department was the tradition of marrying King's daughters born through concubines here. This was owing to the practice of not marrying them within Zenana Dyodhi.

⁴² Kishor 48

Gunijankhana (Entertainment Department)

Music and dance formed an essential part of Rajput life. The richly talented artists of Rajputana found patronage under different Kings and thus was formed the rich and vibrant cultural landscape of the Rajput country.⁴³ Artists both male and female fine-tuned their talent under the guidance of expert Gurus under the auspices of this place. Singing, dancing and playing of various musical instruments formed an integral part of teaching program here. This department was under the direct control of raniwas, which lent special color to the relationship between women dancers and singers with the Royal ladies. They were appropriately gifted and rewarded on festive occasions and celebrations. All the musical instruments like Veena, Pakhawaj, Sarangi, Tabla, Mridang, Tanpura etc. were bought by this department and the expenses incurred on their repair and maintenance were sustained by Gunijankhana⁴⁴

Jawaharkhana (Jewels Department)

The Jewels and gems, which were an integral part of any Royal Rajput household, were primarily resourced from this department. The exquisite chinaware and dishes made of gold and silver were also kept in this warehouse. Jewelers created embellished and precious ornaments of all kind as per the needs and desire of the zenana ladies.⁴⁵

Ann ka Kothar (Food House)

The daily needs of zenana kitchen were fulfilled by this house. Cereals, vegetables, oils, pulses and other such items for daily cooking needs were kept ready in this warehouse and provided as and when required by the zenana *rasoda* (kitchen). During religious ceremonies and festivals the raw material for cooking was supplied from here.⁴⁶ Besides hording dry fruits and sweets which were distributed during happy occasions like birthdays and child birth.

Kamtha ka karkhana (Building Department)

⁴³ Sharma 2000: 20

⁴⁴ Kathuria 13

⁴⁵ Shekhawat 2014: 27

⁴⁶ Shekhawat 2014: 28

Rajput ranis have been famous for their works of philanthropy and charity. They have actively participated in the construction of works of public utility and other buildings. Temples, ponds, wells, *bawris* etc were raised at the personal expense of the Rajput Queens. Hence we see that the Rajput ladies were on par with their Mughal counterparts as far as building activity is concerned. All the necessary building elements like raw material, masons, sculptors, laborers etc came under the purview of this department.

Farrashkhana (Royal Paraphernalia)

In the world of Rajput Royalty lavish celebrations and feasts were organized every now and then. Thus arose the need for tents, carpets, curtains, and floor and furniture furnishings from time to time.⁴⁷ Since women often accompanied the ruler during wartime, elaborate arrangements were made to ensure their comfort and safety.

Nakkarkhana

Nakkarkhana has always been of tremendous importance to the Rajput dyodhi. Instruments like drums, shehnai and nakkara were kept here. Every day Naubat was played twice in the Nakkarkhana.⁴⁸ Before every auspicious occasion there was the custom of working the nagara (drums). People of few castes like Manganiyar, Langha and Dhadhi sang to the beat of these drums.

7.5 A Glimpse of the Life within Raniwas

7.5.1 Dress, Jewelry, and Cosmetics

One common feature of both Rajput Zenana and Mughal Harem life was the great effort and pain taken by their occupants in decorating and bedecking themselves in the most tasteful ways. The

⁴⁷ Pareek 1984: 61

⁴⁸ Chudawat and Swarnakar 2002: 85

need of the polygamous household kept the ladies ever intent to remain the center of their master's attention. *Solah Shringar* or art of applying make-up was an essential part of the zenana ladies upbringing and all the ladies were meticulously trained in it⁴⁹. The women would do make-up and change their clothes twice every day. *Ubtan* bath; wearing fresh clothes; applying vermillion to hair parting; coloring hand and feet; lining eyes with collyrium; wearing garlands; eating beetle; using scents or *itr*; applying *tilak*; decorating hair etc. formed part of daily routine of Rajput Ranis and Maharanis. Before taking their daily bath the women would anoint themselves with scented ubtan.

Different hairstyles were in fashion. Washed and dry hair was first scented with sandalwood and then they were fashioned in different kinds of tasteful braids and buns. All kinds of pearls and flowers were used to accessorize the hair of Royal females. As the Kings usually spent their evenings in the zenana dyodhi women painstakingly decorated themselves as per their personal style, the desire to attract the attention of the master was always present. The royal ladies wore clothes that were distinguished for their finesse and beauty. These colorful, expensive, light-weight and heavily embroidered clothes added charm and effervescence to the beautiful ladies. The traditional Rajputi dress for women comprised of a *Ghaghra- Odhni* and *Kurti*. Embellished with a wide variety of decorative motifs, *gota*, *kinari*, *kiran*, *zari*, *salma*, *sitara* etc. most exquisite, fine, and fancy attires were prepared by expert craftsman of Rajputana. The vibrancy, colorfulness and rich variety of these clothes have come to be permanently associated with Rajasthan⁵⁰. Sometimes the clothes were dyed in scented colors and their aroma would elevate the senses of not just the wearer but also even the passers-by. Examples of such aromatic colors were *malaygiri* worn during rainy season and *kasuman* worn during marriages and other festive occasions of such nature.

The Royal Rajput ladies were as particular about their dresses and styling as were their Mughal counterparts. Different kind of dress material was procured even from far-off places. For example *chanderi dupattas* were a favorite with the zenana ladies. While chit was procured from *Pali*. Few varieties were exceptionally praiseworthy for their fine and

⁴⁹ Chudawat and Swarnakar 2002: 109

⁵⁰ Ibid:106

delicate texture like *zari*, *chhit*, *naurangjebiya*, *malmal*, *gulbadan*, *khinkhap*, *misru* etc. The Dupatta was variously decorated and embellished and so was the kurti (blouse). We get to know that the clothes of Rajput ladies were sometimes influenced by Muslim fashion and style of dressing. Sometimes these women dressed up in fancy Saris also. During the chilling winter of Rajputana the ladies of the zenana dyodhi kept themselves warm by wearing expensive and delicate Pashmina Shawls.⁵¹

7.5.1.1 Jewelry

Like anywhere else in the world women of Rajput Royalty were also fond of adorning themselves with jewelry and ornaments of a large variety. Queens invariably decorated themselves with necklaces made of pearls and precious stones, *bali* (earrings), bracelets, armlets and anklets made of gold and silver studded with colored jewels, fashionable finger-rings of the most exquisite kind were profusely used in the Royal families all over Rajputana. Few other ornaments of note were *tika*, *borla*, *jhumka*, *hathphool*, *kanthi*, *mundri*, *bichiya*, *nevri* etc. It won't be an exaggeration to say that not even an inch of the body was left uncovered by these ornaments.⁵² These ornaments were not only used to enhance the beauty of the ladies but they were also a mark of wealth and high status. Given below are the names of few Rajputi ornaments for women from that period:

“Toda, kadla, bediya, davadiya, dora, anguthiya, santa, kada, chaukiyan, katriya, gujriya, madliya, totiya, bichdiya, karnaphool, jawliya, pagpana, churiya, bajuband, gokhru, jutaniya, tesiya, payal, chapa, bithiya, sabiya, kanthla, murkiya, phool, dupiya, janjariya, nogariya, bor, hesaliya, chada, timadiya etc.”⁵³

For a better understanding of these ornaments and their use we can divide them into following sub-categories:

Ornaments of Forehead: Tika, Bor, Rakhdi, Shishphool

Ornaments of Ear: Jhumka, Bunde, Lung, Totiyan, Oganiya, Tugla, Karnaphool

⁵¹ Sharma 1968:152

⁵² Shekhawat 2014:70

⁵³ Bahi 400,patrank 135,vi.san.1900-1919

Ornaments of Nose: Nath, Bali, Chuni, Besar

Ornaments of Neck: Tevta, Timadiya, Haar, Kanthi, Madariya, Aad

Ornaments of Hand: Bajuband, Paat, Tadde, Kade, Kangan, Gokhru, Punach, Naugari

Ornaments of Finger: Biiti, Anguthi, Mundri, Damna, Hathpaan, Hathphool, Sovanphool

Ornaments of Waist: Kandora

Ornaments of Feet/Leg: Pajeb, Payal, Nupur, Ghunghru, Jhajhadiya, Chelkara, Joda,

Nevra, Aravat, Anota, Phulari, Challa, Pagpaan, Bichiya, Chara

Footwear

Despite general orientation towards expensive and precious jewels and jewelry footwear was not neglected. In fact it formed an inherent part of the entire ensemble of the Rajput ladies. Beautiful *Mochris* or *Pagrakhis* were worn in feet. Ranis loved to wear colorful, pointed and embroidered mochrish. It was mandatory for the women of Marwar to wear mojris at the time of their marriage. Royal ladies chose the color and make of their footwear depending upon the needs of particular festival and occasion. Sometimes they would give instructions about the making and designing of these *jutis* and the expert karigars would turn out the most exquisite kinds of them. Bhinmal town in Jalore was famous for its delicate embroidery work on mochrish and all the Ranis loved to indulge in them.⁵⁴ Embellished with stones, pearls and fine embroidery these mojris formed an essential item of the royal women's dress in those times.

7.5.2 Pastimes & Amusements

Purdah had curtailed women's free movement and hence they had to spend most of their lives within the four walls of the zenana. This gave rise to indoor recreations and activities that would keep the ladies happily occupied and save them from boredom. Indoor games

⁵⁴ Sharma 1968: 153

like *chaupar* and chess were all-time favorites with Queens of Rajputana. These ladies had their own pet animals and birds to cuddle and amuse themselves with. The likes of parrots, *mynah*, cats, ducks and dogs were there for the ready amusement of these ladies. These women loved to spend their free hours in pursuits like painting, composing prose and poetry. Animal fight was another favorite amusement activity of these females. Fight of donkeys and dogs were most famous.(Chudawat and Swarnakar 2002:9) Among the outdoor recreational activities hunting was the most loved pastime of the zenana ladies. They would go out hunting accompanied by their Royal masters. In fact women were specifically trained in this activity. Sight-seeing formed an important part of every royal ladies' schedule. Often they would visit gardens and valleys to relish and appreciate the beauty of nature.

Much like their counterparts in the Mughal harem women of Rajput zenana had their own dancing and singing women for their entertainment besides the singers (*purabias*) who would sing sitting outside the zenana for the general entertainment of all the inmates. However this singing was restricted to morning and evening time. *Ghumar*, a dance form peculiar to Rajputana in which women move in slow, circular motion was a favorite with the ladies of dyodhi and besides dancing themselves on special occasions they asked their dancing girls to perform as a part of recreational activity for entertainment of zenana sardars.

7.5.3 Food & Dining

Food of Zenana women was cooked by their personal staff in their separate rawals or residences. Both vegetarian and non-vegetarian food was cooked in these chambers. Much like the Mughal harem there was no fixed time of taking food⁵⁵ and every lady ate at her own leisure and convenience, the food was kept ready all the time and whenever any lady asked for food, it was served hot. Royal women took their meals on silver *chaukis* (low table) in silverware. However on special occasions and festivals like *Holi*, *Deepawali*, *Rakshabandhan* and *Teej* the food was served in dishes made of gold..*Bajra* was eaten in

⁵⁵ Pareek1984: 63

many forms like *Bajre ki khichdi*, *Roti*, *Bajre ka pulav(soyta)* etc. Dry vegetables like *badi*, *mangodi*, *papad*, *rabodi* formed a part of daily meal. *Rot*, *Roti*, *Bati*, *Pudi*, *Chawal*, *Bati*, *Lapsi*, *Kheer*, *Halwa* and various kinds of pulses and vegetables were regularly consumed in the Rajput household. Among all the delicacies *Dal Bati Churma* was as popular then as it is today. Many tasteful varieties of it were prepared in the Rajput kitchen under expert hands.

In the Rajput household women fondly ate non-vegetarian dishes. Meat of goat, deer, pork etc was consumed. The imperial chefs dished out various kinds of *pulavs*, *biryanis*, *Kimas*, *Shorbas*, *dupyazas* etc. Astonishing varieties of *Roti* or Indian bread were also prepared including *Dudh ki roti*, *besani roti*, *badam ki roti*, *mughaliya mithi roti*, *satnaje ki roti*, *chawal ki roti*, *khasta roti*, *batia*, *kele ki roti* among others. Likewise various kinds of khichdis were also prepared variously called *Jahangiri khichdi*, *Akbarshahi khichdi*, *gujarati khichdi*, *bajre ki khichdi*, *amiri khichdi* etc. Besides these items Royal ladies fondly feasted upon dry fruits like walnut, pistachio, almonds, coconut, kaju etc. Rajputs were very fond of eating sweets. The famous delicacies were different kind of *laddoos*, *malpua*, *ghevar*, *jalebi*, *petha*, *peda*. Wine was dear to both men and women of imperial houses in Rajasthan. In fact there was a strict decorum which had to be followed during the course of taking wine.⁵⁶

There was the provision of holding *goth* (recreational food parties) in the Rajput zenana. The Maharaja accompanied by his ladies visited places of scenic beauty and enjoyed food in the accompaniment of music and dance. Zenana ladies often organized there independent goth parties.⁵⁷ Paan or beetle leaf was fondly chewed by the Royal ladies. There was a separate department meant for this purpose called as *Tambolkhana*. Weddings, birthdays and festivals in the imperial household saw preparation of hordes of delicacies in the zenana kitchen.

⁵⁶ Chudawat and Swarnakar 2002:55

⁵⁷ Sharma 2000: 38

7.5.4 Festivals

Festivals and fairs formed an important source of entertainment for the *pardanasheen* Ranis and Maharanis of the Royal household. All the important Hindu festivals were celebrated in the Rajput Mahals and Rawalas. The festivals of Shivaratri, Dashahra, Janamashtami, Makar Sankranti, Holi, Ramnavami, Basant Panchami, Sharad Purnima were celebrated with mirth and gaiety. The festival of Holi held special place among all these festivals as the women decked in their traditional attire played Holi among themselves. Even the Maharaja would come inside the zenana to participate in the festival of colors. The Rajasthani festival of *Gangaur* was another important occasion for celebration in the Raniwas.⁵⁸ Both married and unmarried women participated in this festival, a wooden statue of Gangaur was sculpted on this occasion, which was faithfully worshipped by the Maharanis. A procession was carried out consisting of elephants, horses, camels. The members of the zenana dyodhi walked with the divine statue decked in red colored clothes. After going to a certain distance the procession would come back to the mahal.

Like in the Mughal harem King or Maharaja's birthday was a magnificently celebrated occasion among the Rajputs also. The celebrations ensued in both the zenana and Mardana Dyodhis with fanfare and pomp. After the days celebrations the Maharaja would visit the zenana dyodhi at night and attend the *Majlis* there. The king was seated to the left of his mother called *Maji Saheb* while other women of the zenana presented gifts to him. It was customary among the Rajputs to celebrate the birthdays of Ranis along with that of their royal master.⁵⁹

7.5.5 Contribution to Literature, Art & Architecture

Like the Royal Mughal ladies the women of Rajput royal families took great strides in the field of literature, art and architecture. Many temples, ponds, *jhalras*, *bawris* owe their construction to these Rajput ladies. One of the most famous names is of Rani Bhatiyani

⁵⁸ Shekhawat 2014: 70

⁵⁹ Pareek 1984:185-194

Besides doing extensive charity this lady engaged in active building activity. *The Teeja Mata ka Mandir* stands as a witness to her devotion towards religious activities.⁶⁰ *Achalnath Sivalaya* was constructed at the orders of King Ganga's wife Nanak Devi to celebrate the occasion of her son's birth. Not just the queens but concubines were also actively engaged in construction activities of all kind. While Kunjbihari temple in Katla Bazaar owes its origin to Gulabrai, Rasikbihari Temple was constructed under the orders of a concubine named Nanhilai. Besides devoting their time and resources to the construction of temples many works of public utility like wells, ponds and *bawris* were constructed by the Rajput queens for the betterment of the general public. Since there was great dearth of water in Rajputana it was but expedient on the part of the Royal ladies to work towards constructing sources of water storage. We have many such examples like *Ranisar talaab*, *Gulab Sagar*, *Swarup Sagar*⁶¹, *Gyan Sagar*, *Kalyan Sagar*, *Baiji ka Talaab*, *Anjan Bawri*, *Phulelav Talaab*, *Tunwarji Ka Jhalra*⁶² etc.

The Royal ladies of Rajputana were not only brave and spirited but also learned and wise. Much attention was paid towards the education and training of the young princesses. Female teachers were instituted to teach them various traditional subjects like literature, astrology, and religion. Many Ranis have left behind works of great literary merit which is chiefly religious in nature. Ironically these Kshatriya queens adopted the path of God when their lord's were engaged in warfare. Perhaps because while reveling amidst all kinds of luxury and comfort they were aware of their vulnerable and precarious condition. For women whether Muslim or Hindu, Mughal or Rajput did not have a voice of their own in those days. As their real achievement lay in surrendering to the whims of a polygamous master and remaining the object of his affection.

With time the fairest of maidens were to lose their charm and beauty. Every succeeding year and new victory of the King was to bring more new wives and concubines to the already swelling zenana. Thus fierce competition prevailed amidst all the co-wives to win the Lord's favor. To add to the worries of the Rajputnis was the constant fear of enemies

⁶⁰ Shekhawat 2014: 180

⁶¹ Gupta 2004: 81

⁶² Nagar 2002: 56

born out of incessant warfare in the medieval age. A lost battle and subsequent death of the King meant general loot, arson, molestation with the inmates of the Raniwas being an easy target. Women for that matter were the prized possession in those days. In fact women took resort to means like sati and jauhar thus ending their lives instead of suffering defilement of their honor at the hands of the enemy. It's thus understandable that religion gave refuge and solace to women in such chaotic and uncertain times. The *Bhakti Marga* was a means of escaping from their hidden sorrows, loneliness, vulnerability, and uncertainty of those tough times.⁶³ These ladies composed many beautiful *bhajans*, songs, and verses and have thus left behind many works of tremendous literary merit.. Written in Rajasthani form of *Brijbhasha* with liberal *marwari* and *Gujarati* influence these songs and bhajans attract us with the simple elegance of their form. Most of these ladies had either Ram or Krishna as their deity and the songs were mostly written in their praise. Like Mughal queens and princesses many female poets and composers flourished in the Rajputana also but unlike the Mughal tradition many paswans (concubines) also proved to be good and talented poets and composers.⁶⁴

Written by Pratapbala, Rani of Maharaj Takhtsingh of Jodhpur the following verse expresses her longing for Lord Krishna:

“Preet kari me syam sundar se, ja din se sukh na sajni Va vir humka vin humka, lagat hai

dukh si ranjani Talfat hai machli vin pani, taise pran karun tajn

Tau Milan ki Milan ki avat na unka lajni⁶⁵”

7.5.6 Death Rites

Death rituals were as devotedly observed as all other customary rites in the Rajput zenana. In the world of zenana dyodhi a certain protocol was followed in death just as it was adhered to during the lifetime of its inmates. The kind and manner of last rites indicated the status and position of the deceased woman. For instance in the Jaipur raniwas taking

⁶³ Sharma 2000: 51

⁶⁴ Rathor 2002: 137

⁶⁵ Shekhawat 2014: 195

out of the death procession through Tripolia or the southern gate of the Royal Palace was considered a matter of great pride and honor. As per the norm only the dead body of the chief queen was supposed to be taken out through this route. While among the Jodhpur Royals the dead body of Rajmata and other royal ladies were taken to either Sidheshwar or Mandor for cremation.⁶⁶ The family priest would carry the deceased ladies' body to cremation ground where it was lit as per the rituals. When the news reached the Palace the King (husband) underwent the *ashauch ka snan* (cleansing bath ritual). The other ladies of the zenana dyodhi also went through the same routine. On the demise of royal women one times' customary *Naubat* (drum-beating) was given a miss. All the post cremation rituals were faithfully carried out. State mourning was observed for 12 days, during this period no celebrations or festivals were observed. Colors of mourning like black, blue and white were worn by the women of zenana dyodhi. The official mourning drew to a close with a big feast called *brahmabhoj*, alms and donations were given and sweets were distributed for the peace of the departed soul.

7.5.6.1 Sati

The custom of *Sati* was widely prevalent in Rajputana; we have historical testimony of various Queens and concubines of Maharajas ascending the funeral pyre of their husbands. The custom was not a forced one and not all King's women chose it, in fact the ones who committed Sati did so out of their own resolve. The women intending to do sati dressed up in their finest clothes would reach the cremation ground in a grand procession. The women would sit with their husband's dead body on the funeral pyre, which was lit by the Priest and not the son as per the general practice. When Uday Singh died in 1652 many queens and concubines mounted the funeral pyre with him. Akbar himself went to watch the Sati procession at Lahore.⁶⁷ Satihood was not restricted to lawfully wedded wives of deceased King but all the women associated with him could commit sati. Royal concubines, dancing and singing girls etc. followed this path. There was the custom of constructing *Chatris* on the sight of Sati. Mandor near Jodhpur is famous for its Chatris and few of them are of great artistic merit.

⁶⁶ Ibid: 122

⁶⁷ Singh and Ranawat 1988: 75; Nagar 2002: 7

Conclusively we can say that like the Mughal Harem the Rajput Zenana Dyodhi or Raniwas was an immaculately organized set-up. Strict observance of Purdah and the total seclusion of their women formed the cornerstone of both these institutions. The Rajput and Mughal seraglio shared many common grounds. Senior female relations of king were given high honor in both the places. While motherhood helped consolidate the hold of a lady in zenana it was not a necessary pre-condition as many childless ladies went on to acquire greater importance in their husband's life. Jealousies, feuds, and conspiracies were a common feature of both places, driven by insecurities women would try to sabotage the image of king's favorite wife or concubine. However the chief difference between the Mughal and Rajput seraglio lies in the kind of importance given to concubines in the Rajput Rawala. It is not as if the system of concubinage was not found among the Mughals but the kind of influence that concubines came to exert in the Rajput context is outright exceptional. The practice of forced spinsterhood among Mughals does not find a parallel in the Rajput domestic world.

The ladies lodged inside the Raniwas as well as the Mughal harem led a life of luxury and comfort. Except for the differences of race, color, creed, and religion the overall ethos of both the places remained the same. The entry of Rajput ladies in the Mughal harem led to a happy union of the Hindu and Muslim cultures. However the Rajput dyodhi remained exclusive in its nature given there was no instance of Mughal or Muslim ladies entering it. The Raniwas/harem women dressed in expensive clothes, ate the daintiest food and spent time in merry making amidst Royal paraphernalia but they also had to resort to vagaries of a polygamous household and uncertainties of the chaotic medieval age. This made them extremely religious in both the contexts. However we can't say that these ladies were only hapless victims of medieval tyranny. Infact they exerted tremendous influence from behind the veil.

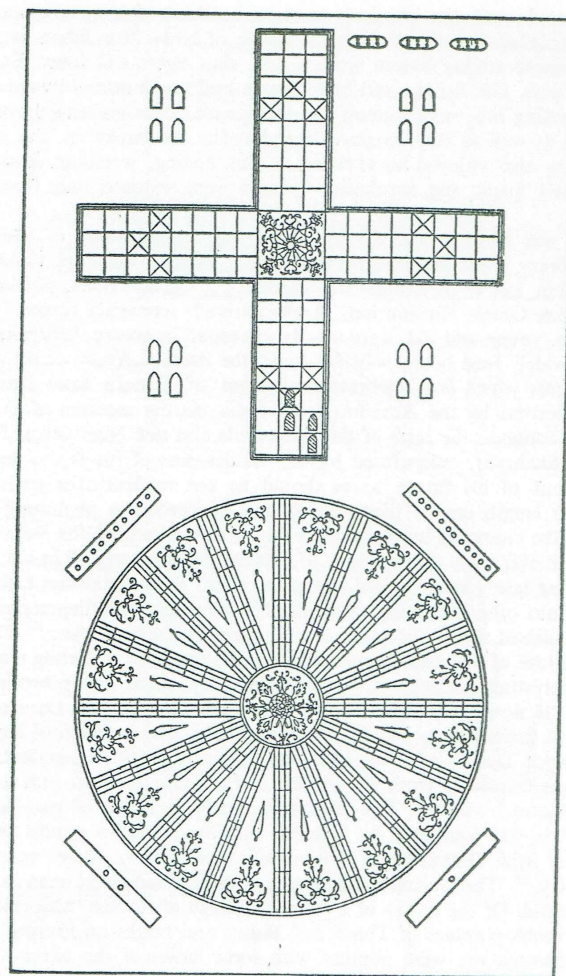


Fig. 1. CHAUPAR AND CHANDAL MANDAL GAMES

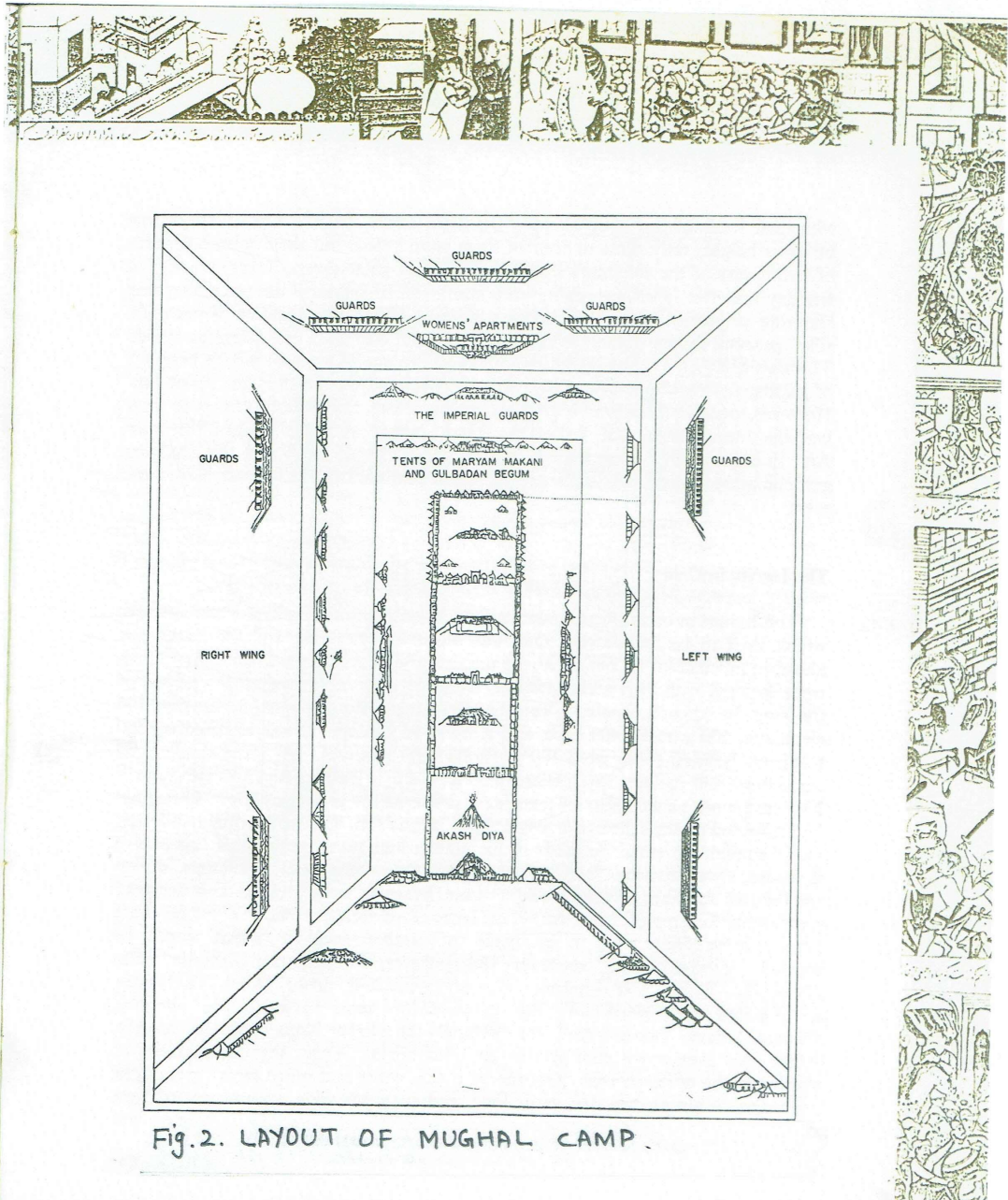


Fig.2. LAYOUT OF MUGHAL CAMP.

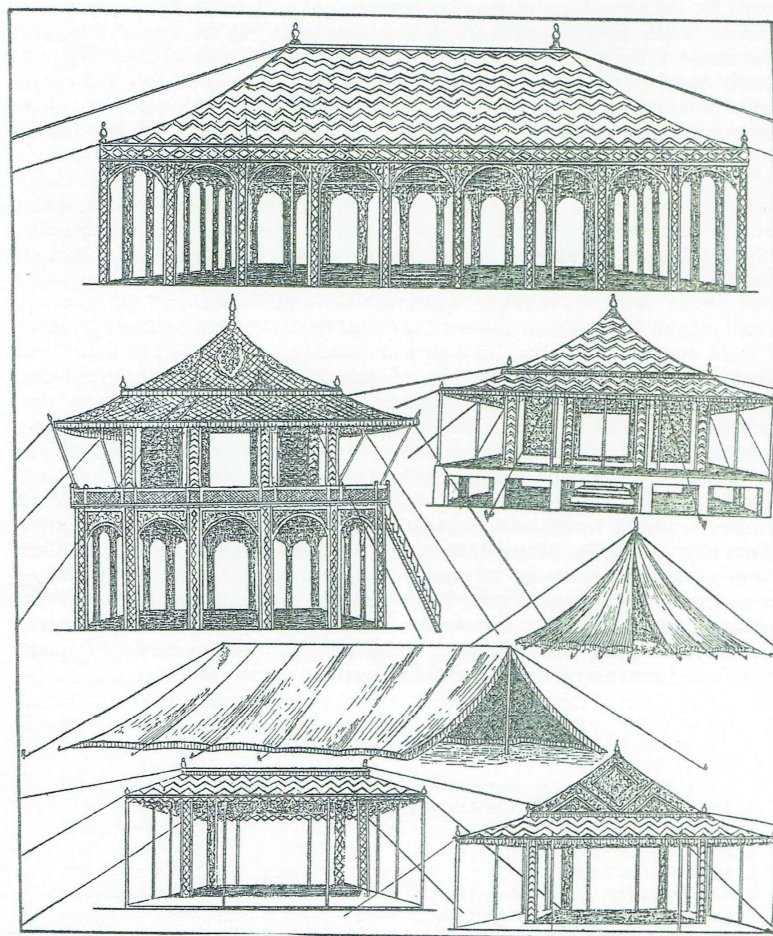


Fig.3. DIFFERENT KIND OF TENT FORMATIONS



CONCLUSION

There is no dearth of Historical narrative on Medieval Indian History and Mughal history in particular but unfortunately it is centered around the exploits of great kings and Emperors. Women are either absent from these accounts or are found lying on the fringes. In fact they seem to have become anonymous owing to the Akbari tradition of referring to women by titles and not their names. However we have rare incidents of a Nurjahan or Jahanara achieving great merit and influence but that was more because of their individual talent and effort instead of the general Mughal policy towards women. It is not that women were denied a happy and healthy life it is just that they had a limited role to play in the Mughal world. As mothers, wives, sisters and daughters they were regarded and loved. Many ladies constructed beautiful edifices, were trained in sword fight, wrote beautiful poetry, and did works of charity, few even engaged in business activity. Last but not the least women acted as sagacious councilors and peace makers often interceding in family disputes to solve feuds. Not to forget their reproductive role in helping propagate the Mughal line. Thus we see Mughal women performing a variety of roles but more or less they engaged in *womanly* pursuits. Within the four walls of harem they were more or less free to live the life of their choice but women for sure had no role in power sharing.

My fascination for Mughal harem began while I was doing my dissertation upon the most celebrated and controversial Mughal lady - Nurjahan. It was during the course of my writing dissertation thesis that I came to know about harem life of the Mughals. However it was just a skeleton thought, which has taken a concrete form over the years. During the last few years I have been totally engrossed in the subject. The biggest problem that I confronted while working on the present study was the lack of reliable primary sources. For Persian chroniclers have largely chosen to remain silent on the private side of Mughal Emperor's life for the practical reason of not disclosing the closely guarded family secrets. On the contrary the foreign travelers have dwelled at length on the Mughal domestic life. It is quite interesting to note that because of strict observance of *pardah* none of these Europeans was ever allowed to set foot inside the Mughal seraglio. The ones like Manucci who could manage to get inside, in capacity as Royal physician had to resort to strict

protocol and could never see the Royal ladies face-to-face. Most of their accounts are based on bazaar gossip and second hand information procured through servants and eunuchs.

Besides being overtly interested in floating salacious gossip about the ruling family the foreign travelers also suffered from the limitation of time, culture, language, and race. All these put together deeply colored their view of all things Indian. For them Indian rulers were feeble minded despots steeped in debauchery and all things Indian were unhealthy, uncivil, and retarded. Thereby it won't be wise to blindly follow the assertions of these European travelers concerning the Mughal harem. However we can't brush them aside completely given they are the only contemporary source regarding the Mughal domestic life. Hence only after a careful perusal of foreign traveler accounts we should believe them. Another noteworthy aspect of medieval historical accounts is the wide difference in the projection of women's condition. While court chroniclers like Abul Fazal have spoken of the imperial harem and the life of its occupants in laudatory terms, foreign travelers have labeled it as nothing more than a pleasure house meant for satisfying the inordinate lust of the Emperor at the expense of freedom and happiness of its female occupants. Hence the challenge lay in uncovering the true nature of the Mughal seraglio with a more open, modern approach while keeping in mind the medieval sensibilities and ethos.

The uniqueness of the present work lies in the fact that I have attempted to undertake an unbiased study of the Mughal private life free from prejudice and bias. As there is the tendency to either ostracize this Mughal institution or to glorify it. I on my part have tried to remain unprejudiced while committing my thoughts to writing. As everything else in life the Mughal harem life had its own pros and cons. Both have been amply discussed in the present study and a rational and scientific approach has been adopted while dwelling upon this sensitive aspect of Mughal history. Unnecessary romanticizing and scandalizing have been refrained from. I have attempted to remove the shroud of secrecy over the lives of the multitude of women inhabiting in the Mughal zenana. In fact a unique part of the present research work is the comparative study between the Mughal Harem and the Rajput Raniwas or Zenana Dyodhi. It has been attempted to signal out the points of similarity and difference

between the two institutions. Interestingly there were many points of similarity between the two seemingly different establishments. Further peculiarity of this work lies in the wide variety of source material both primary and secondary that was consulted during the writing of this work.

A comprehensive approach was adopted while writing the present work. Besides consulting primary sources, which comprised of both firsthand accounts like memoirs and biographies from the period as well as foreign traveler accounts. A host of modern works of Indian as well as foreign authors have also been widely consulted. These works were of tremendous help in not only widening my viewpoint but also gave a modern approach to the present study. Various field trips were undertaken to places of importance to the current work of study like Agra, Fatehpur Sikri, Jaipur and Delhi. The structures at Fatehpur Sikri and Agra Fort were of special help as a sneak peek into the construction and style of harem could be gauged. A walk through the *Mahals* and women's quarters gave ready reference to the regality and sophistication of the times gone by. Local guides and residents of surrounding areas were especially helpful with both their anecdotes and valuable information preserved since many generations.

The present work is an honest attempt at understanding the fine nuances of the harem life. While remaining focused to the cause of this study I have tried to take account of the emotional and psychological aspect of women's life in Mughal seraglio. Not much work has been done by women in the field of history writing. In my opinion the present work will prove useful for both the scholars of the subject and the general reader as it brings to life a forgotten and misinterpreted aspect of our past. It has been tried to clear the general prejudice and stereotypes that have long been associated with this institution and become a part of our collective memory. The present work is a sincere attempt at reworking our past in a fairer manner. In today's time when women's studies have taken such a central space it is but necessary to explore such an important theme of history.

A study of the harem besides setting right the wrong stereotypes that have come to be associated with our past serves two purposes first is to give inspiration to the future

generations specially to the women of the minority community. The very fact that women in those times were not only highly educated and multi-talented individuals with many leaving a mark on history can be a great motivating factor in the lives of today's women. Second it also teaches us to learn from our past mistakes. For polygamous households were a reality of the medieval age but today there are no kings and emperors. Harem life thus has become a thing of the past today, as it is neither fair nor practicable for a man to have innumerable wives but to expect complete fidelity from his women and to ensure their seclusion to this end. History as they say is a classic teacher and we can definitely learn from our past experiences towards living a better life.

There is tremendous scope for further study in this field as besides focusing on the life of Mughal women's life in the harem I have also endeavored to draw a comparison between the Mughal and Rajput private life. Given the kind of close association that grew between the two races it is but imperative to undertake a study of this kind. A separate study of full-fledged nature can be undertaken on this subject. As a further suggestion the time period of the present work which is from 1526 A.D. to 1707 A.D. i.e. from the coming of Babur to the death of Aurangzeb can be stretched further. The current study of harem can be taken till the end of the Mughal dynasty in 1857. The life and condition of women in zenana during the later Mughals can be compared with that of the erstwhile Mughal rulers and it will form a very interesting and informative study in itself. On the whole the study of Mughal harem life pertains to the basic human curiosity to know about the private life of mighty people. The present narrative is a humble attempt to bring to light a keenly preserved aspect of Mughal history. It is an endeavor to rediscover the Mughal domestic world while taking account of the desires and hopes, sadness and happiness, trials and tribulations, achievements and failures of generations of women lodged inside the imperial harem.

Solutions and Output Reached at the End of Research work

The present work being a topic of Medieval history we can't arrive at any solutions per se. However the biggest advantage that can be drawn out of this study is in terms of doing away with all the misconceptions that have been created about the Mughal family

life. Either there is no information or whatever information that is available is half cooked. I must also mention that the Hindi movies or Bollywood as it is fondly called have a big hand in shaping the public opinion on this subject. The films must be credited for bringing the life and characters from pages of history books to reality. But a big flaw lies in their being too glossy, *filmy* and largely away from reality. Something we call cinematic liberty in modern parlance.

It is very important to be apprised about one's roots, one's past and one's history. No nation or race can survive without the knowledge of its past whether good or bad, beautiful or ugly. History gives us the perspective and the ability to know and analyse our mistakes so that we can correct them and not repeat in the future. Same goes for the present topic. In today's time when women's discourse has taken centerstage world over it is but natural to discuss the condition of women in the times gone by. The concept of monarchs and their harems has become obsolete today but the issue is still relevant as in it lie the seeds of present condition of women and especially of the minority community. Rule of Emperors might be a thing of the past but the women are still struggling with many problems and challenges. Herein lies the importance of the present study as a closer look into the lives and achievements, highs and lows, trials and tribulations of strong female figures of the past can not only inspire our young generation but many corrective measures can be taken to improve the condition of women in the country. I sincerely hope that the present research work, written on a women centric topic from a woman's perspective would be able to do service both to the cause of history and society.

While writing this work I realized that the life of the Queens and Princesses was neither a bed of roses nor a thorny sojourn. In fact it was a heady mix of both. They too were humans and faced their own set of problems. The vagaries of a polygamous household would certainly have taken its toll on them. While the stronger ones faced it boldly the weaker ones like Manbai couldn't endure the hardships and ended life by committing suicide. We are aware that in the medieval times women had no role in power sharing. The power that they exerted was indirect and was conveyed to them through the Emperor. Being the mother, favorite wife, sister or daughter empowered the ladies of the Zenana. The situation has drastically changed today in the 21st century as women are far more self reliant,

enterprising and powerful. They are taking care of home and work with equal ease. Hence there can't be a direct comparison between the women of today and the women of medieval India. Here we must note that during the medieval times opportunities like education and good lifestyle were not accessible to ordinary girls, generally the daughters of Kings and nobles could afford good quality education as they could arrange for private tuitions at home. While today women from all the sections of society are free to get education and work according to their capacity and choice.

Still we can't deny the fact that names like Razia, Nurjahan and Jahanara are etched in public memory. Many centuries have passed in between still these names fascinate and intrigue us. Their rise to power and fall are still relevant as they stand as symbols of hope and survival in the most extreme conditions. None of the Mughal Queens and Princesses could ever sit on the throne of Hindustan. The closest that came to the *Takht* was Nurjahan who literally ruled the empire with the help of her clique called Nurjahan Junta. Our country has come far ahead of those times as we have had women occupying the highest offices in the land but this can't take the credit away from the medieval ladies who lived in times when women lived restricted lives. Their stories give us hope, assurance and confidence that spirit of womanhood has always withstood the test of time and proven its caliber. Being aware that not long back in history *Pardanasheen* women participated in trading activity, built fabulous structures, were well read and composed beautiful poetry, were also trained in martial arts and some of them were expert shots women would definitely inspire the young girls today to aspire for higher achievements in life. Not to forget we can also learn valuable lessons from the period gone by. As already mentioned the polygamous harem life could not have been a welcome choice for the harem ladies.

It is unfair to expect complete fidelity out of women with men philandering around. But we must not forget that those were different times. The norms and practices of medieval world can't be compared to those of the times we inhabit. It has been rightly said that *Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it*. By this I don't mean to say that we are again going into the chaos and upheaval of the medieval days but it is always good to remain informed and aware about our past so that we can learn from it.

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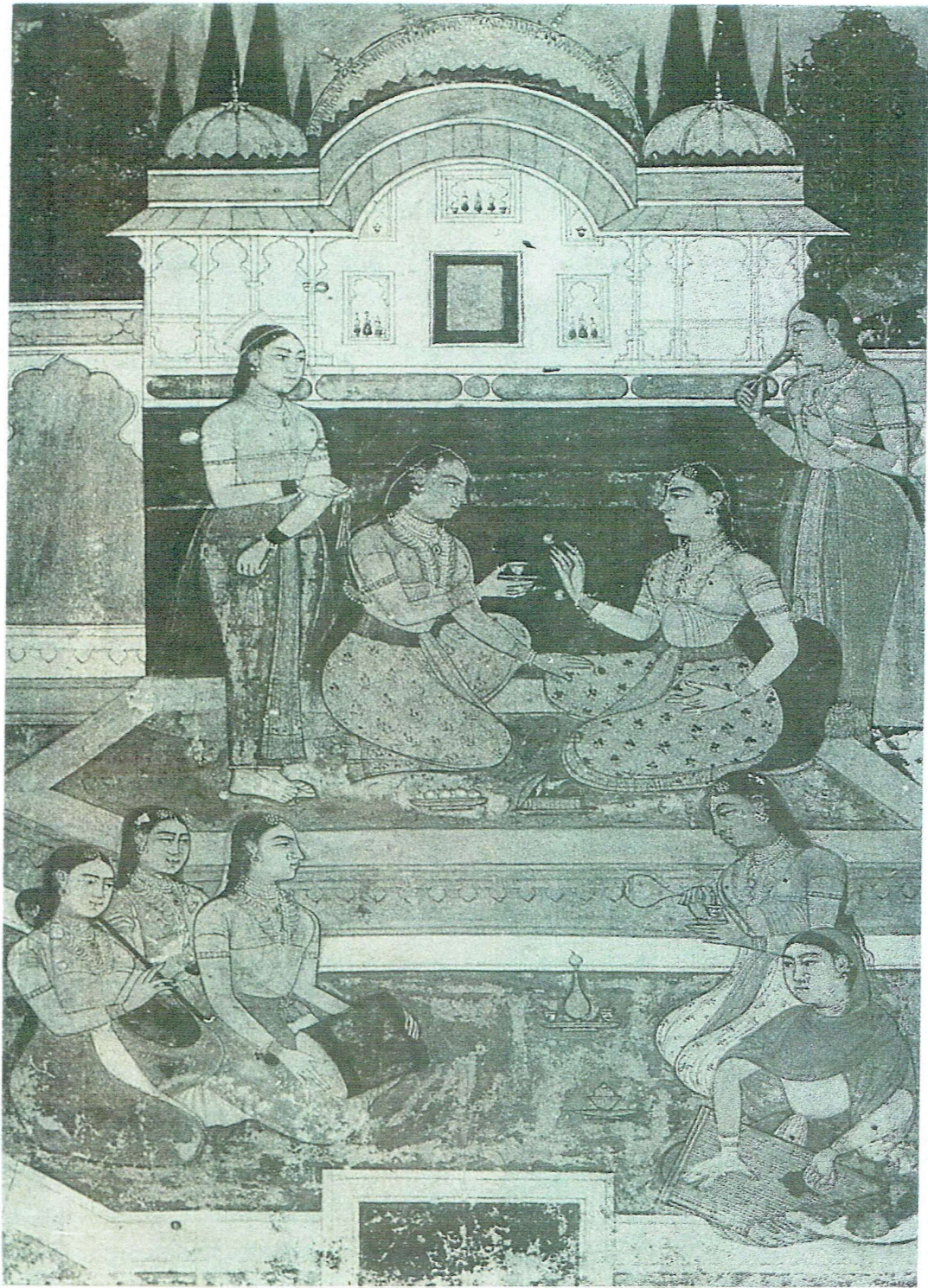
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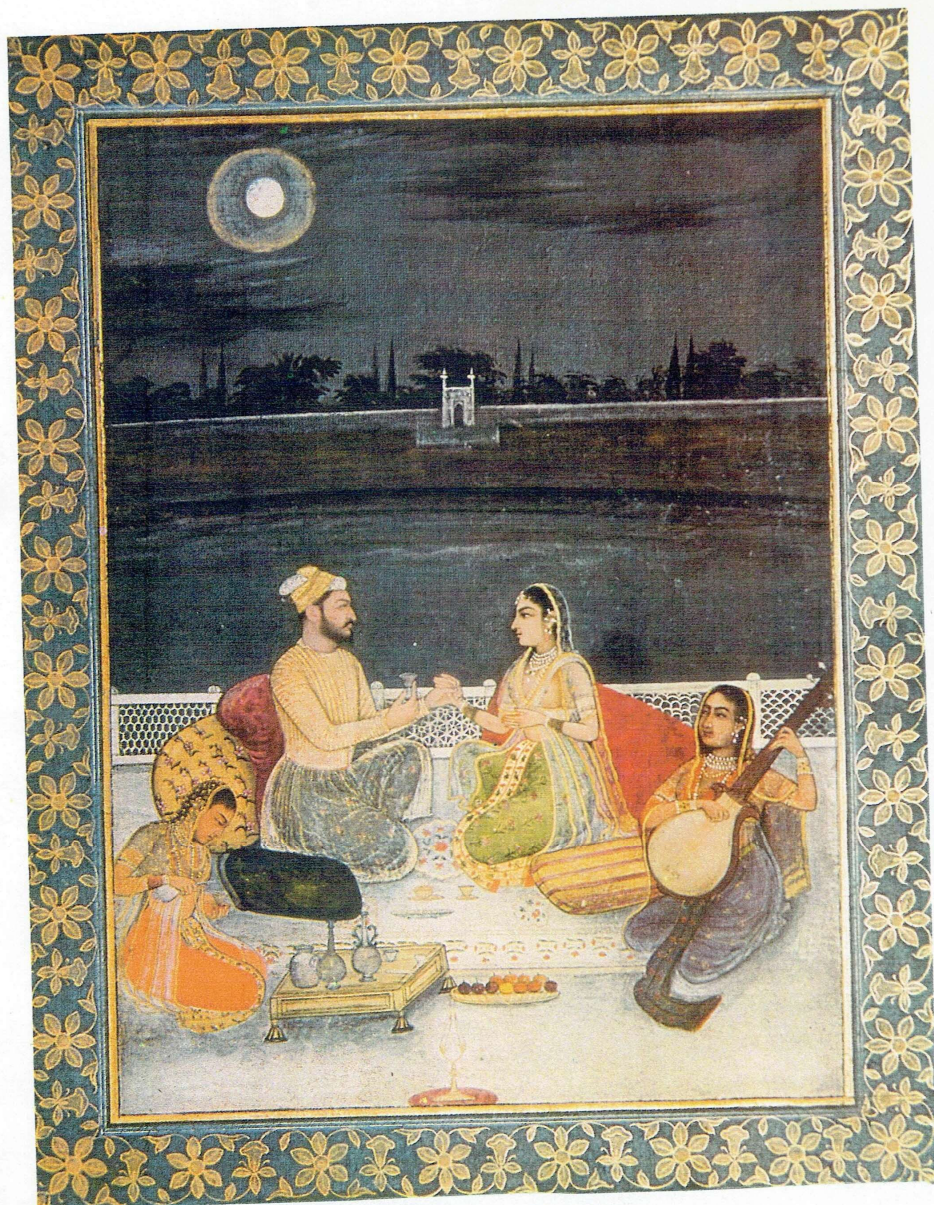


PL.I. WOMEN BREAKFASTING IN THE HAREM



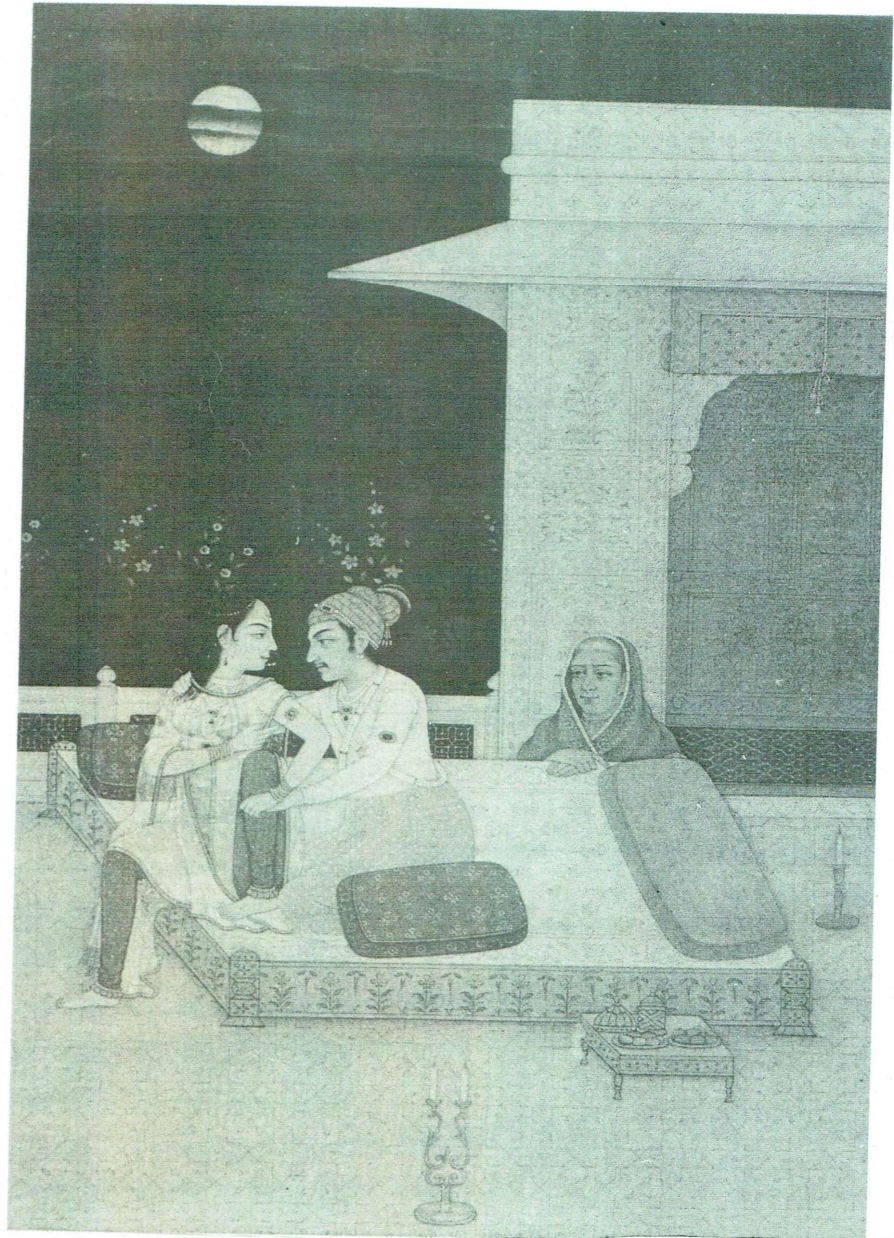
PL.2. WOMEN TAKING WINE IN THE HAREM



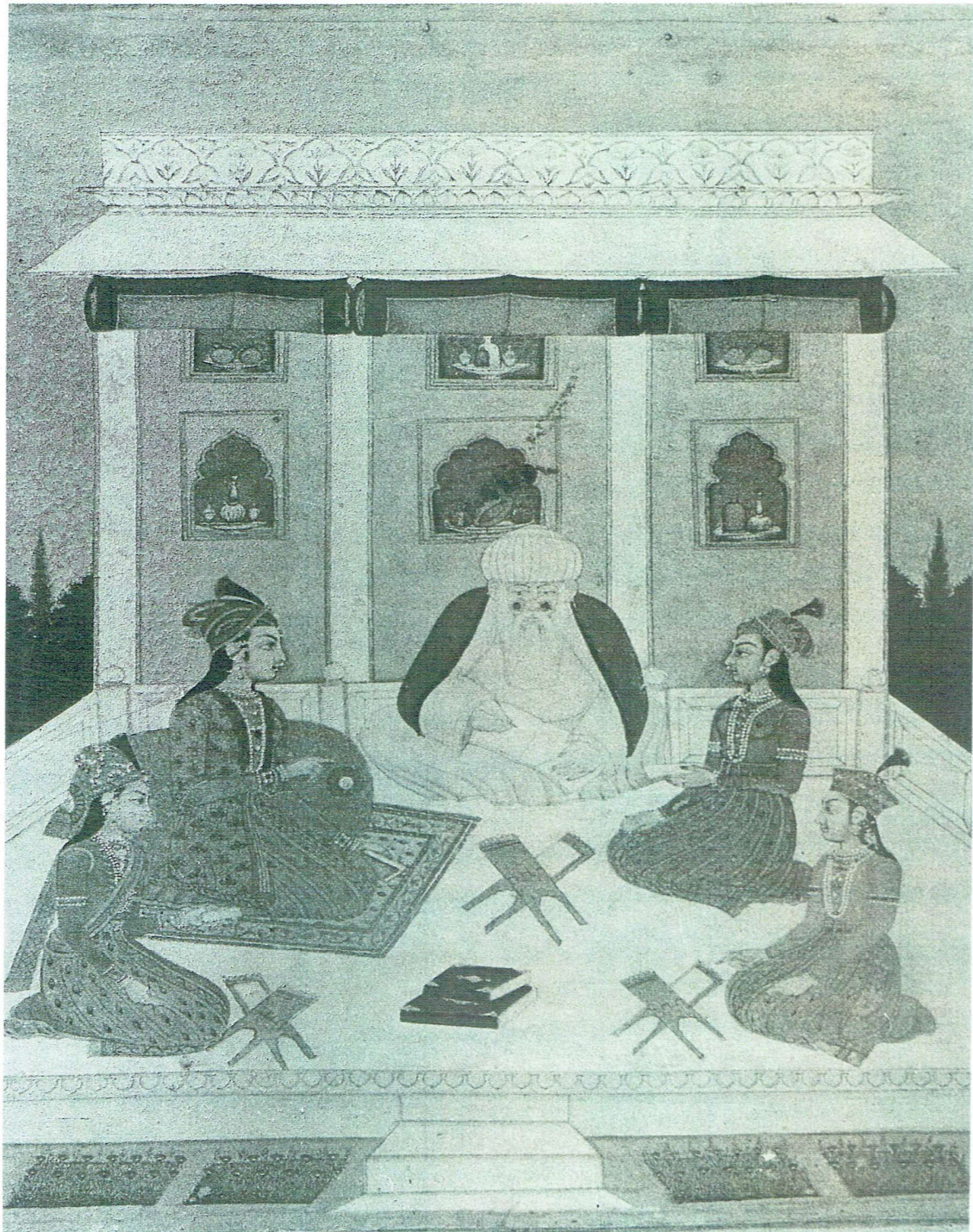




PL. 5. NURJAHAN HOSTING JAHANGIR & PRINCE KHURRAM
AT MANDU (1617 A.D.)



PL.6. A SECRET RENDEZVOUS IN HAREM WITH A MATRON IN ATTENDANCE



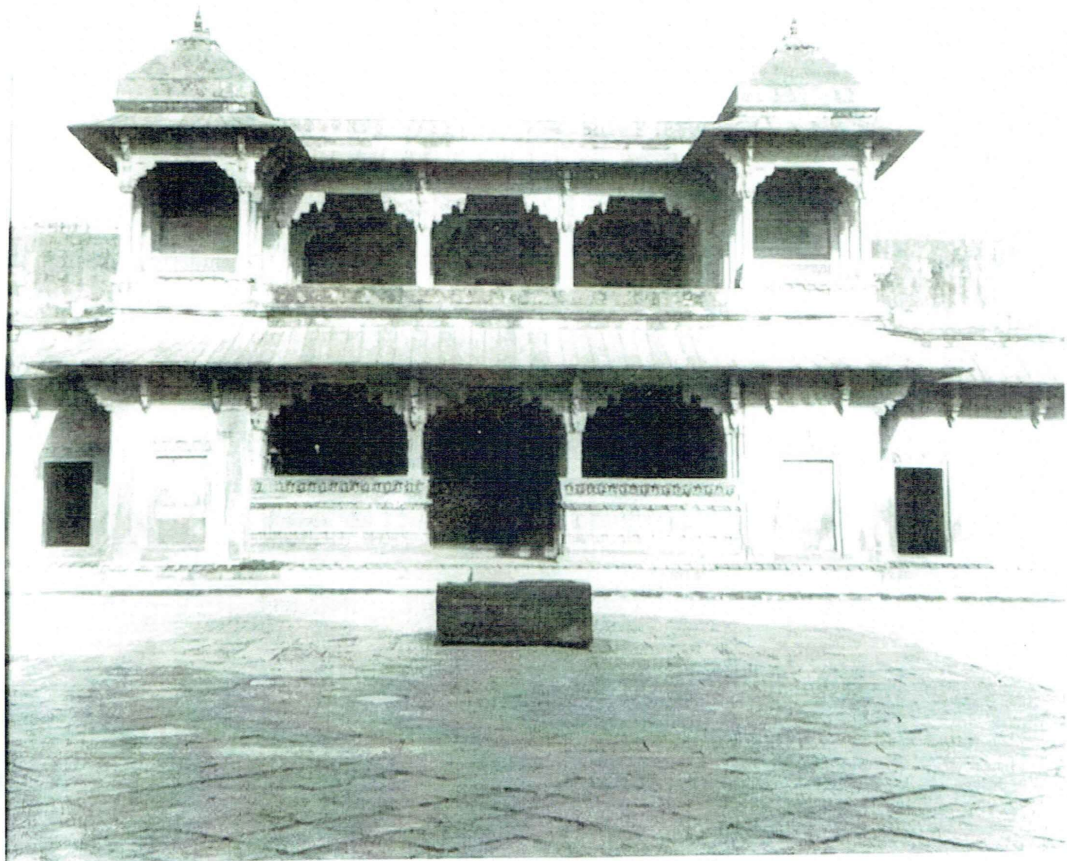
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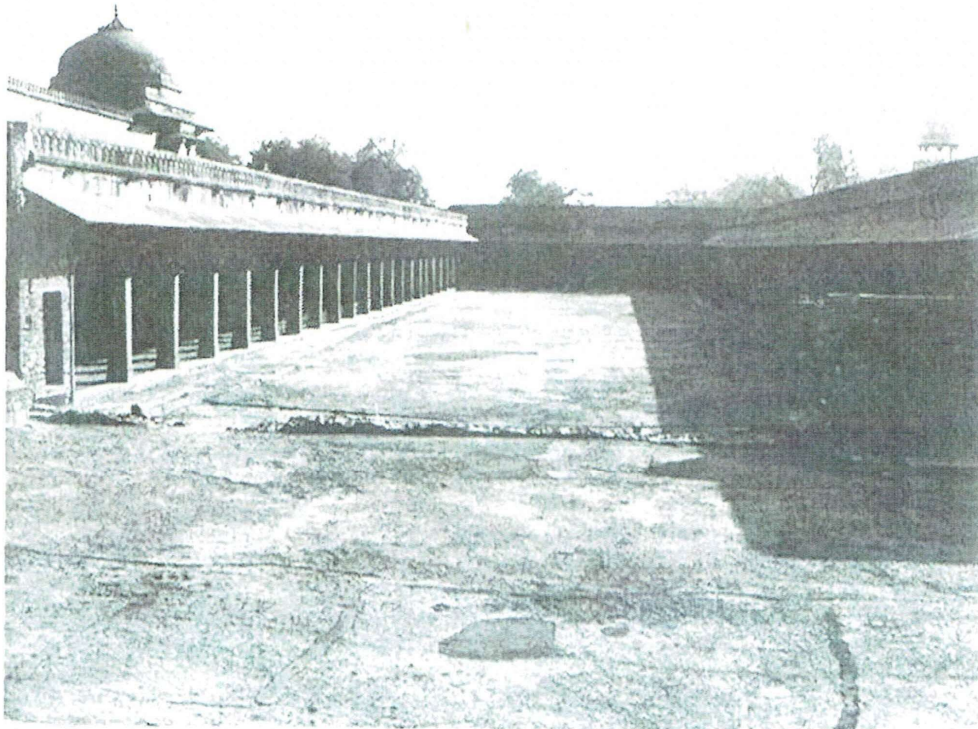
PL.B. REJOICINGS AT THE BIRTH OF PRINCE SALIM



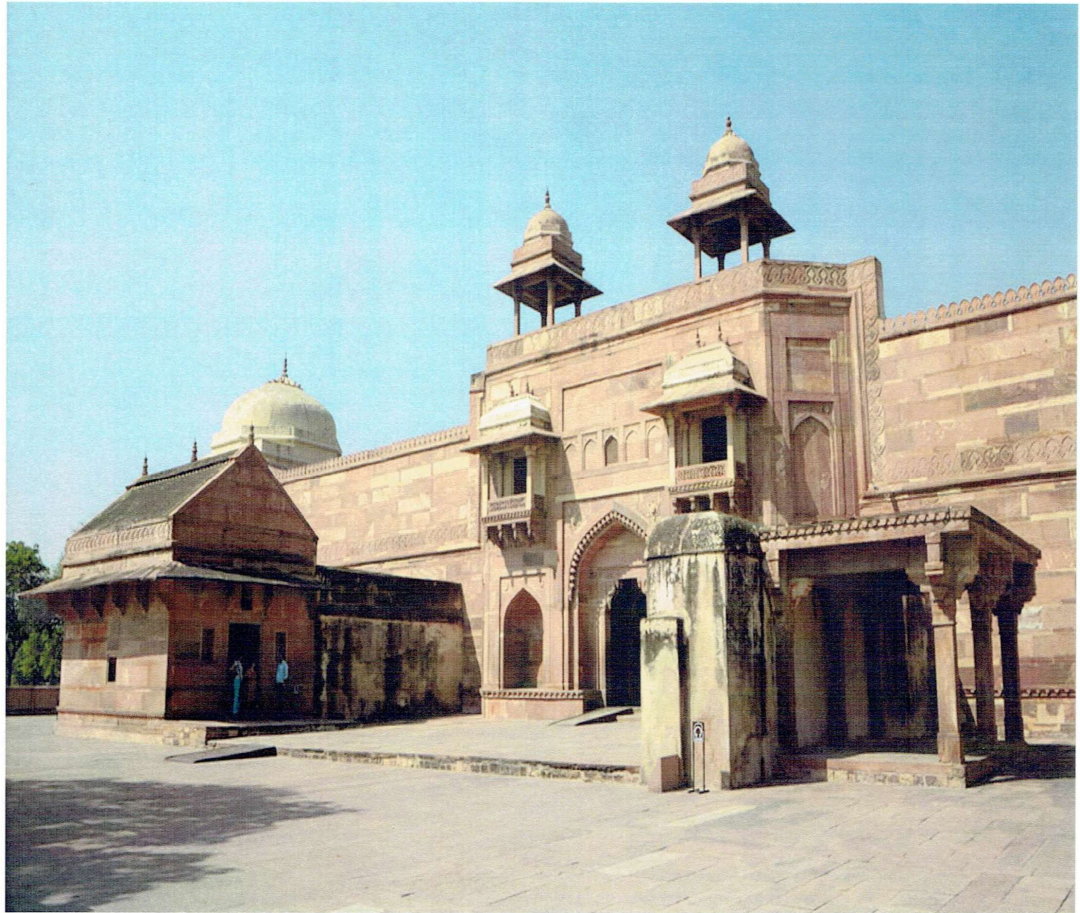
PL.9. MARRIAGE PROESSION OF DARA SHUKOH

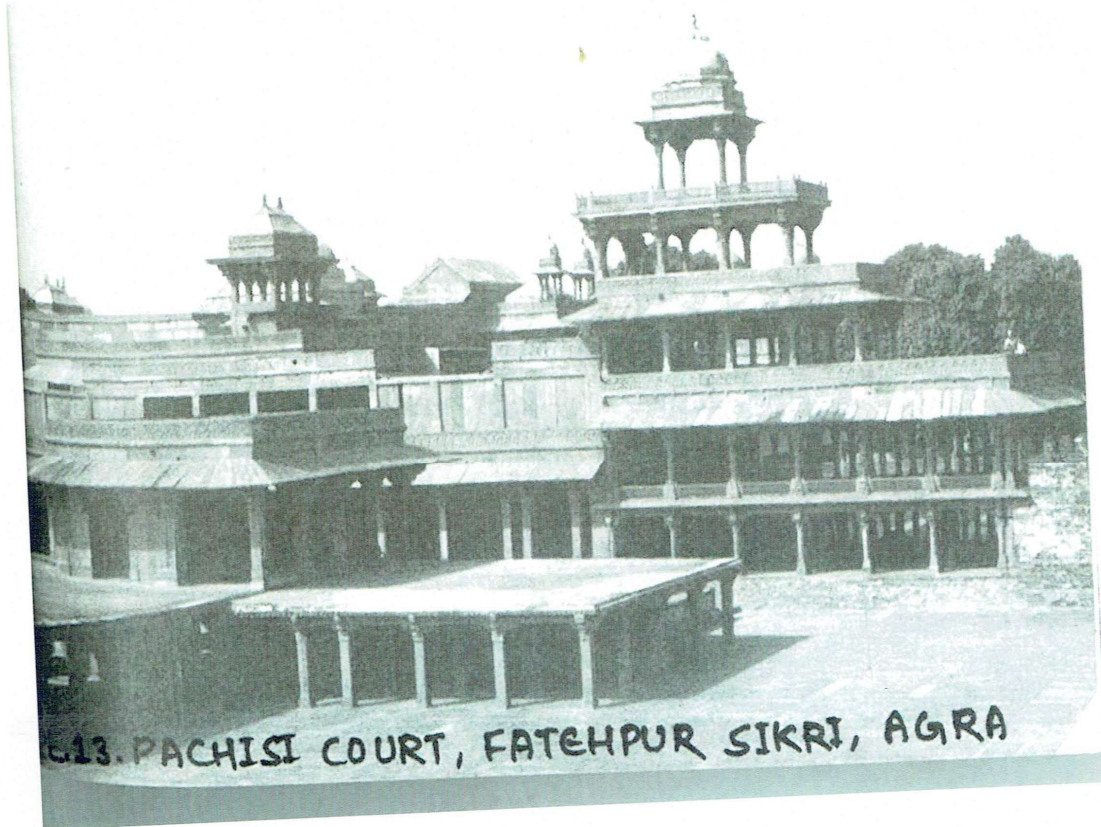


PL.10. HINDU TEMPLE FATEHPUR SIKRI, AGRA



PL. 11. SHAHI BAZAAR, FATEHPUR SIKRI, AGRA

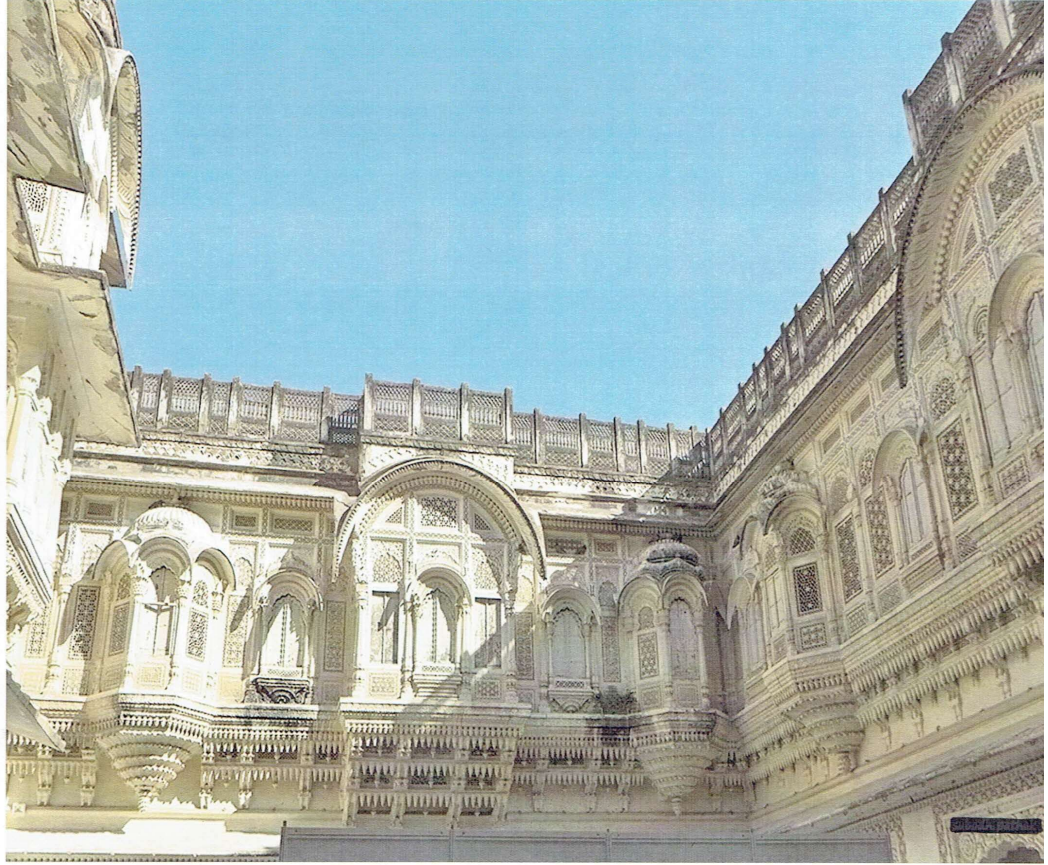


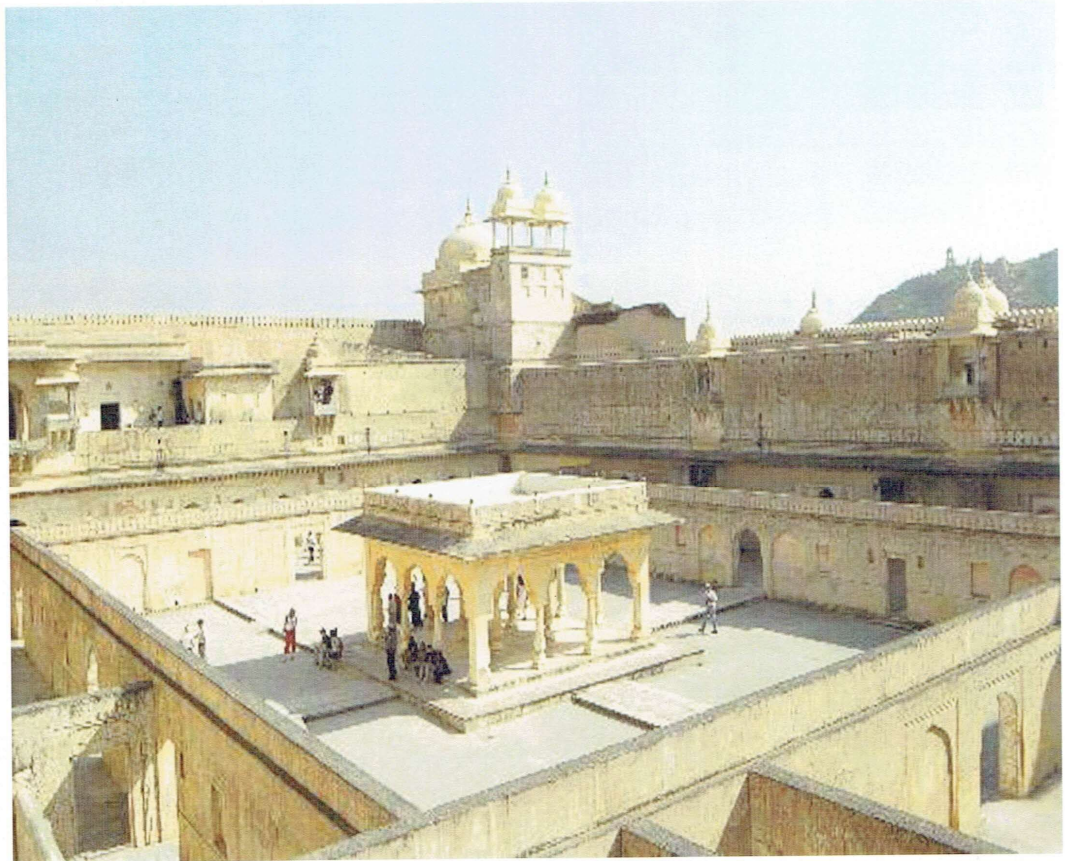


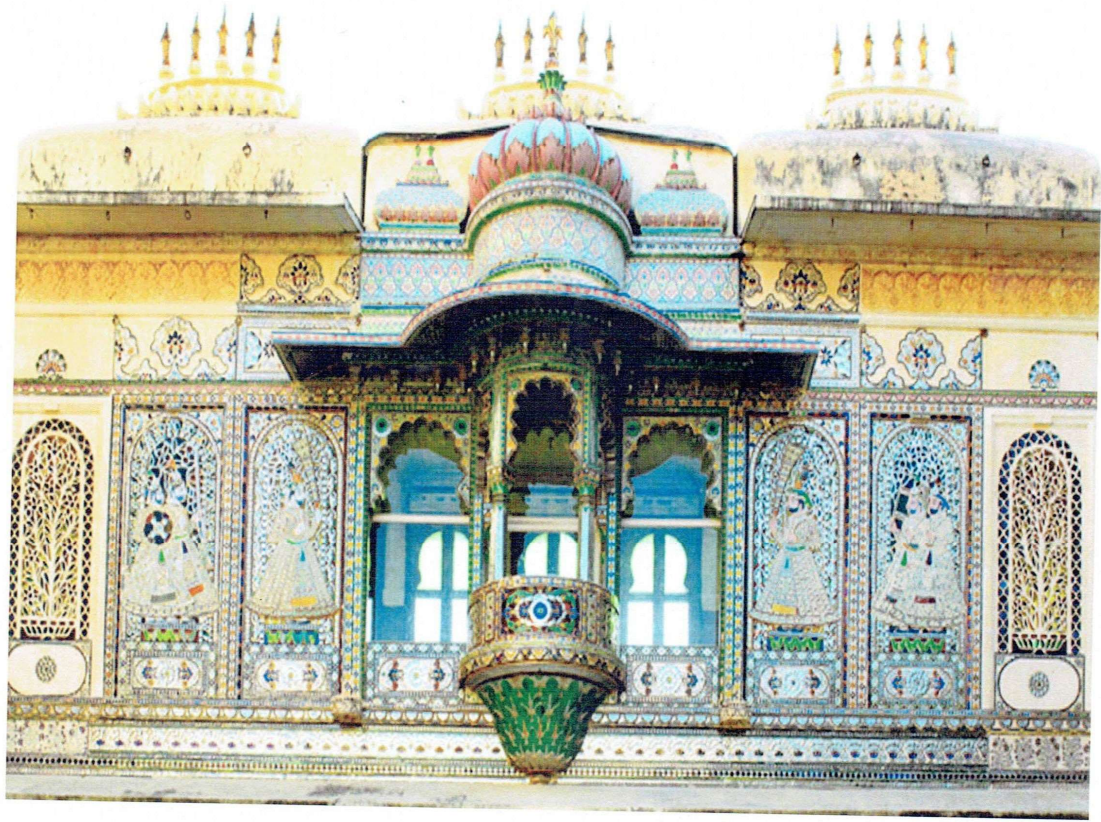




PL. 15. TOMB OF KHWAZASARA, AGRA







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